

APPASSIONATA



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APPASSIONATA

BOOKS
by
FANNIE HURST

APPASSIONATA
EVERY SOUL HATH ITS SONG

GASLIGHT SONATAS

HUMORESQUE

LUMMOX

STAR DUST

THE VERTICAL CITY



APPASSIONATA

by

Fannie Hurst



ALFRED · A · KNOPF

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To

THE MEMORY OF

PAULINE REHBEIN

SHE WALKED IN BEAUTY

*O Love! Once he drew
With one long kiss my whole soul through
My lips, as sunlight drinketh dew.*

BOOK I

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THE day that Fleta came home the wind blew down the street in long unceasing slants, with fish-hook ends. It was a day of poles. Poles of water and the hooks curled up right off the sidewalks and splashed into the easy crevices of low shoes.

Laura, who was warm in bed, could see the poles stalk past her window. It gave her the curious feeling of many men rushing by on stilts. Oblique stilts that would have foreshortened the faces of the men high upon them.

Dudley's face when he foreshortened it to lean back and laugh or to yawn became like a baby's. All dimple in chin.

If you yawned as Laura yawned, you uncurled slowly, like a great cat, and out to an absurd longevity and then in again, cozily, to the same warm design that you made under the bed covers.

To yawn as Laura could yawn, was to be as complete as a full moon.

"Y-a-w-n," said Laura, and all her muscles ran out and flexed for her to that instant of ecstatic rigidity and then shimmered back again, neatly and exactly into place.

That was it! To yawn as Laura yawned made you shimmer of the ecstasy of the flesh. . . .

Then you dozed off again. So easily. Like the great cat that curled up again surely into its design.

Stalk. Stalk. Stalk. The poles of rain past the window. They could stalk you back to sleep. But if you pulled open one eye, a lovely, drowsy bright blue eye that wanted to stay down, you could see, by the small heart-shaped mother-of-pearl clock on the mantel. Six-forty-six.

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That must be Father now, stamping in the hall. The dull clogging of his footsteps since his first stroke. Victor limping him off to seven o'clock mass. Oh, dear — yawn — yawn — to be the daughter of a Father who didn't demand the entire family around seven-thirty breakfast table!

Mary Walsh, who had always lain abed until eight and now that she was married, breakfasted off a little blue enamel tray that fitted over the bed!

Oh, dear — yawn — yawn — Frank at breakfast with the swollen-looking flaps under his eyes. Mother's egg with the underdone white that slid over the cup edge. Kate who slip-slopped. It wasn't really that so much, though, as the uncurling. You had meant to uncurl for seven o'clock mass over at the Little Holy Rosary on Amsterdam Avenue. Of course Father, even with his dragging foot, went all the way up to St. Xavier's. Mother, too, at eleven. But the slanting poles of the rain. Wet feet and laryngitis. The Max understood. . . .

If you opened the same drowsy eye ever so slightly, there He was. The Max.

He had been Fleta's gift to you on your twelfth birthday. The painting of the Christ head by Gabriel Max. The anguished Head there against the parchment background. The fleck of blood from under the thorns and the veined lids that were closed over the eyes like two bits of hurting web. . . .

It said, in a little printed paragraph down in the corner of the Max, that if you gazed long enough the eyes would open upon you.

They never had, of course. But just the same, sometimes, on the lazy mornings, saying your private devotionals to the Max up there in the little niche you had contrived for him, with the ledge before it for the dish of pansies; sometimes it almost did seem that the hurting bits of web did quiver, or was it the quivering ecstasy of your own eyelids in prayer?

You could no more have described that little ecstasy. Often

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at mass it came out over you like a rash of electric lights the size of pinheads. You had felt it once when Ashfurth Ropps, a boy friend of Frank's, had passed you by rudely and too closely in the hall. Sometimes now — when you danced — but chiefly, almost solely, when you prayed —

Ashfurth Ropps. It was curious how a memory, an irrelevant one, could lean out of the past at you. As lit as a lantern on a pole in a parade.

Ashfurth Ropps had been seventeen when you were fourteen. He had carried your books once from the corner and flung them down a little insolently by the strap on the lowermost of the brown stone steps and when you had reached to pick them up his rough cap had brushed your cheek and his eyes too, in a way that — you couldn't help it — in a way that you sometimes remembered. Even now. You remembered. . . .

Well, what of it? There had been a time along somewhere when you were about fourteen, when you secretly, oh, so secretly used to think of Ashfurth. And that time when he had passed you by rudely and too closely in the hall — that was the moment that leaned so out of your memory sometimes.

You put it behind you of course, a little ashamed.

And then there was the time . . . there was the time, you did not want to remember it, when Ashfurth had snatched a kiss off your cheek when you had rung at his bell to summon Frank home to dinner and he himself had opened the door and leaned out saucily like a Jack from his box, and pop, there you stood kissed!

What could be more unrelated and irrelevant than those memories out of little childhood naughtinesses and — and little girlhood ecstasies.

Mass. Wet feet. Laryngitis. If you said your own private little improvised devotionals at home — to the Max — it was the same — since the rain gave you wet feet and laryngitis and Father could be really horrid about the car.

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Y-a-w-n. You were so deliciously snuggled there.

Stalk. Stalk. Stalk. The rain. All the little men high up, with their faces foreshortened. Dudley's. Dear Dudley's. You snuggled into the curve of your arm and you drew up your feet and through the doze you knew dimly, botheringly, — mass — Fleta coming, too. Fresh flowers for her room and the children's bed to be hung with toys — Fleta with that dreadful red welt that had made even Father want to bring her home.

You were ashamed of not quite wanting Fleta home. Fleta whom you loved, but Fleta who pattered so. Like Mother. Father was that way, too. Of course after the red welt, and because you had cried as you pleaded and Mother's hands had never stopped wringing, he had sent off the telegram that was to bring Fleta and the children home. And yet he could not help being horrid about it.

It was no longer easy to understand just what Father was saying now since his voice had thickened from the stroke. But you knew, without even unclotting the words.

Fleta no longer belonged at home, but with her man. It would not matter that the defection had all been Quinliven's. Father would make Fleta feel the defection as if it had been hers. That was why, when Fleta came with the children, you must be up and dressed and downstairs to greet her. You wondered what train — you must get up —

The stilts of rain. Pur-r-r-r, you felt, of warmth, and slipped deeper beneath the consciousness of Fleta, and Dudley, foreshortened on the stilts and the underdone white of Mother's egg where it slid across the cup. . . .

The hall clock had a way of preparing to strike. It cleared its throat first. That whizz of spring could invariably land you on your two bare feet out in the middle of the white fur rug beside the bed.

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It was as if the little spring had awled softly into your brain.

You, lying on the edge of seven-thirty. And then, on that whizz, out clear into the middle of the bearskin rug.

The urn-like loveliness. The body just that. A Greek urn with the slight flatulence of hips below the handles and the long tapering vase of torso.

It shone through the flimsy texture of nightgown. The little curving-in at the waist line, to give flare to the thighs. Body rhythm in the way one stood with legs firmly together in a great stem and with the power to be swift standing still in them and that feline power to curl them up closely until the knees came out into moons.

That was you. Slow strength. It lay sleeping in your curves. When you yawned it rippled along them and made your legs flex like a toe dancer's.

Slow delicious gyrations of you there on the bear rug with the urn of body shining, feet in the white lush, back arched with yawning and arms snakes, with fists for heads, winding and winding.

Breakfast. Father would be back from mass, any moment. In a taxicab with Victor, because it saved wear and tear on the family affair. A six-year-old model. That was Frank, now, turning on the water in the bathtub. That meant no bath for you before breakfast. Frank with his frenzied splutterings and now the smell of a new pomade-stuff with which he tried to plaster his hair, making the entire third floor smell tonsorial all afternoon.

Oh, well — it was hard really to mind when one awoke in the morning, sweet. Sweet with life. Besides, one could bathe later and more luxuriously with Frank out of the house and Father down in his office. Long and slowly. Tepid, scented water in which you could lie as if you had been caught and frozen into a warm iceberg. To be frozen into a warm

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iceberg and the luster always preserved on your whiteness! Sillily audacious quirk of thought.

You swung your arms up, Hallelujah, and down again, Hallelujah, until your fingertips touched your toes.

Hallelujah, you said to the day. The rainy one of the slanting poles of water. How you shimmered of the sweetness and of life and of youth. It made you feel like a lamp burning in the gray room. Up, up again; down again, until your fingers touched your toes! There it was again! That oily sweetness of the pomade that never would lay Frank's babyfine hair. Frank, who was sure to come down to breakfast with the flaps under his eyes.

Fleta who was coming home to-day.

You said your improvised kind of prayers to the Max. Your own dear immediate kind that shot you through with the little ecstasies. You loved saying them to Him there in His niche, with His beautiful agonized eyes making the web of the lids seem to quiver and the gout of blood, adored by you, seeming to spurt down over the lapis-lazuli and filigree rosary that you had wound about the pansy dish.

The niche had been set up on a birthday. Your twelfth. The first birthday after Fleta had married and gone away with Quinliven and you had been allotted Fleta's old room.

The Max reproduced in halftones against a background that looked like parchment. The eyes that quivered to open. And the filigree and lapis-lazuli rosary festooned over the niche had been mother's gift to you for first communion. There had been a candle bracket under the niche, but there was a soggy spot in the plaster there and the nails would not hold. Besides it was so bright. The niche. It made the room to shine.

You before the niche with your head bent and the low running threnody of intimate prayer so secret to you . . . the prayer without form — the colloquial little intimacies before the Max.

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The urn of you as you stepped out of your nightgown. You shone. There was a cheval mirror. One that had been wheedled out of Father. Laura at the shrine of Laura. It was as if you purred. The flesh, sweet as milk. The glitter of hair as you unbound it and let it flow like a cascade carved out of sheet gold.

Hallelujah! The gray day of the slanting poles. The gray day into which you shone like a lamp. Hallelujah. You said it with your flesh, if you were as fair as Laura. The hallelujah of the pink, the purring flesh.

That must be Fleta and the children now! When you leaned out of the third-story window the rain blew into your hair which was all slicked down now like gold leaf, and you knew that little round drops quivered on its smoothness. Yes, a taxi! Fleta should have wired and been met. A yellow taxi. The only bright thing in all of Eighty-second Street. The long lean street. The brown-as-a-judge street. Columbus Avenue at the near corner and the high performance of the elevated railroad. You knew all the shops underneath. Upholsterer's. Dry Cleaner's. Fancy Fruits and Vegetables. Tobacconist and Stationer. You had run in and out of them as a little girl.

All the brownstone houses opposite in their brownstone rows. Fine houses in their day. As a little girl you had lived in a fine house. And now you were living in a fine house that had had its day. The boarding houses were nudging it ominously. From all sides. Stoops. Stoops. You had played jacks on many of them as a little girl. While they were still "private houses." Now yours was one of the few "private houses" left on the block. Storm doors buttoned up against the rain. You had played hide and seek among them, and many a late afternoon been sent over to number 27 where the Ropps had once lived, to summon Frank home from playing with Ashfurth in the third story back. And many a night had you slept opposite at 29, with Mary, before old Judge Kinealy

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sold, and a fourteen-story apartment house went up on the site of the old Kinealy home.

The rain raced down the narrow genteel street and washed it like an old bone. There was only your hair glittering out into it and the yellow taxicab.

You loved the glitter of the yellow taxicab. It was as yellow as a weather-beaten old sun that had got itself caught somehow down there in the raininess of Eighty-second Street.

Yellow glitter of Laura over her window-sill and yellow glitter of Fleta's taxicab.

There was Fleta now, piling herself backward out of the cab! Hunkily. The way the dear would do it. Leave it to Fleta to pile herself backward and hunkily out of a taxicab.

You wanted to be glad that Fleta and the children were home to stay. You were — except — dear, dear Fleta — that little catarrhal snorkle of hers that was Mother's all over again, and the way she always had of pulling at the children as if she were tying perpetual bows under their chins. The sweetness of Fleta and the tediousness of having her home. The little jelly quiver to her hips when she ran upstairs. The inevitable boorishness of Father to her. The easy leak of Mother's tears over her. The tediousness of having Fleta home. You wanted to be sweet about it. You *were* sweet about it.

You must be downstairs to make the coming easier for Fleta. Little silk things that slid on so perfectly over your shimmer. They dropped so softly on to the smoothness. The little twist to stockings just below the knees leaving them bare to shine. The black dress that slid over your head without disarranging the gold-leaf flatness and down over silk knickerbockers with one smooth rush and out you came from the neck of your frock, golden as a jonquil.

Dab. Daub. Powder and puff. Glitter of Laura. The comb in a last flicker through the smoothness of head. One hair rose from the slickness and stood out in a single electric strand.

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You wore your hair like the shell about an egg. A yellow Easter egg. In all the claptrap of the clipping of heads, no one even broached it to you. The rightness somehow of hair that fitted you like a wimple. So smooth. So plover-smooth. So close. Flat, painted-looking ripples in gold leaf, away from a center part and back in a close little egg that rested right into the white little nape part of neck. The gilt wire hairpins. The floor was always strewn with them. Dudley used to pick them up and kiss them and put them into the waistcoat pocket where he slid toothpicks. When you put up your hair, they stuck out in six ways from your mouth and you darted for them with nimble fingers.

Dab. Daub. Fleta and the children were already in the lower hall now. You could hear little Bobbie crying. He cried in a long croup. Oh, dear! You wanted to be glad that Fleta and the children were home to live.

Outside in the third-floor hallway, just the very moment you left Laura's room, it started in being the house. Laura's room with the pink lamp shades covered with shirred mousse-colored chiffon and the bed with the changeable taffeta cover with its large L of pink silk rosebuds and the little lace baby-pillow that you hugged while you slept and the cheval mirror that stood opposite the bed on the white fur rug and the long boxes covered with changeable taffeta that stood on the dressing table crammed with gloves and bonbons and ribbons of orchid and violet corsages. There was a little canopy over the dressing table that made it a bower of taffeta and cream lace. The very instant, though, that you left Laura's room, the house began, darkly.

Even on bright days there was need of a light at each landing, which could be clicked off again from the lower hall.

Gas fixtures that had been converted into electric so that the bulbs spouted off from beneath the gas globes, rather grotesquely.

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In the end, converting the fixtures had cost as much, if not more, than new ones would have. But you could no more have convinced Father of that!

On the landing outside of the room of all of Laura's little loveliness, an enormous black walnut chest of drawers bulged so that you had to edge to reach the stairs. It had always stood there. Horridly. The drawers were packed with pillow shams, the winter supply of pecans and Father's Knights of Columbus uniform. Ugly thing of bulge. Your shins were never quite free of blue spots from impact with its corners and Frank could wake you when he came in late, kicking it as he passed.

It was one of Mother's gentle tenacities, that chest. She who usually gave in so helplessly with her wrists lying weakly in her lap, had for years and years stood out against removing that chest from the upper hall.

Father seldom came up to the third floor, and since his stroke, not at all. One good bump on his shins might have banished the bulky thing.

Down on the second floor, the door to Mother's and Father's room stood open. The enormous bed, made up for the day, was like a moor. A gray moor with a solemn hillock of bolster. There was a crucifix above it with a black iron Christ in torment, the palms and the insteps painted red where the spikes went through. Dabs of blood. They were the only flecks of color. Soberness of black walnut. The wardrobe with double doors grazed the ceiling. The dresser, a huge one, had a brown marble top and the loveliest clearest mirror. As if it were never looked into or breathed onto, or ever troubled to reflect the mere dinginess of what it saw.

Mother's and Father's small articles in their usual precise and ugly geometry. The hartshorn hairbrush with its thinning bristles. Father's aluminum pocket comb in its leather case. Two empty, pressed-glass perfume bottles that had stood

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in identically equidistance on that dresser ever since you could recall. Mother kept her accessories in one of the small upper drawers. There was something that stabbed you with pity about the contents of that drawer. You never knew quite why, except to open it made you hurt for Mother. It wasn't a mussed drawer. It was a bleak little drawer, half filled. There were a package of gray celluloid hairpins. A box of cough lozenges for Mother's tickling in the throat at night. A real lace fichu. A jet rosary in a silk-lined case. An invariable sack of peanut brittle. A ceramic brooch of Fleta, Frank and you taken at the respective ages of eighteen, sixteen and four. A pamphlet entitled, A Guide to the Mass. A palm-sized Bible and one of those small bottles of scent that are to be purchased off of pasteboard cards in drug stores. A dreary little drawer, except for the peanut brittle. Sometimes, if the taffeta boxes happened to be empty, you stole down to nibble, and then when Dudley's next offering came, you paid it back grandly, in cream chocolates.

Father's small upper drawer was empty except for a stack of expired insurance policies and building contracts that smelled like his mustache and a gilded walnut with views of New York on the inside that had rolled around that drawer for years. There was a shaving brush too, that had become a runt. It and the walnut nut made a great ado rolling about the emptiness if the drawer were jerked open.

A moor of a room. All the rooms were like that. Except yours. The brown street of the brown houses of the brown rooms. Brown. The halls swam with it. Even Frank's room, that had bookshelves and a student's lamp and framed Anderson prints and a genuine and beautiful old Spanish credenza that he had brought home from his summer in Europe the year before he left college — even Frank's room was a blank. A blank stare.

Fleta and the children, jamming up the lower hall with

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bags and baggage and talk and croup, were already brown with the fog. It swam through the house so. Fog of years. Except in your room.

It made Mother's throat tickle at night and when you looked at Frank, it was as if, because his hair was so blond and his eyes so light, that you were looking at him through the blur of tears. And it was only fog. The years of the indoor fog.

. . .

Fleta. Dear Fleta. How plumpy she was. When you embraced her she was soft as mud with warm fat. It made her seem to have no more consistency than cold cream. A fine-grained, sweet cold cream. Fleta had not worn stays, even the boneless rubber stays of the vogue, since Bobbie was born. Something abdominal had gone wrong then. She was all spread out as if she had melted. And her yellow hair full of gray now, escaped in strands over her collar. And Fleta never bothered to powder. Her face had a bright chapped look.

Oh, Fleta. Fleta. Of course, Mother would cry. You waited, tight too, at your tonsils, but your eyes very bright. Bright with welcome. Bright with a little dread of Father, sitting down there at the breakfast table, where Victor had tucked him, waiting. Waiting coldly, you feared, while Fleta, arriving up in the hall, needed his welcome so. If only Mother wouldn't snivel and snorkle and keep her head buried in Fleta's coat collar as if there was something of a death about Fleta's home-coming.

That was it! Once Father had decided that Fleta might come home, there had been something of a death about it. Fleta, the wife of a prosperous Albany contractor and assemblyman, had died. There was coming home in her place an outcast woman who had been struck until a red welt

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glowed across her dear blowy face and two children who were to be hard on polished floors and walnut furniture.

Mother crying for the daughter who had been Robert Quinliven's wife. Quinliven who had raised the welt. Fleta smelling of rain and children and her dear dowdy hat dragged by Robbie's ruthless little hand to the back of her head, and crying too, and Bobbie croupy and Bennet back there in the chocolate fog of the front hall kicking already with his copper toes at the black walnut hatrack and shouting "whoa."

If only Mother wouldn't snorkle. . . .

Oh, Fleta, you called to her with your heart, don't let them rebuke you with their too careful kindness. But on the surface you were matter-of-fact with trying to be debonair. As Frank would be presently, too. Of self-consciousness.

"Hello, Fleta, dear," you said, and kissed her with lips that were hurting for her and tossed up little Bobbie who was three and yellow and beautiful, until he got to laughing in a long croup and Bennet who was five made a flying leap for your neck and hung there and had to be pried off.

But Fleta was not for being debonair any more than Mother was. Fleta wanted to cry. Her tears were of the same shamed salt as Mother's. Already with her sweet, dowdy-looking, full-blown face Fleta was being apologetic and meek for coming home and somehow that hurt you terribly.

Subtle insidious family thing that could make the welcoming home of Fleta a rebuke.

"Laurie — little sister — isn't it too dreadful!"

You could feel the long heave of her under the surgings of the soft white fat and her sweet untidy eyes, all strewn over with the hair strands that Bobbie kept yanking down, had scalded-looking rims to them.

"Nothing is dreadful, dearest. Except your crying so."

"It was Father who suggested it. I — might have stuck

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it out. The children. It wasn't the first time Quin had struck me ——"

"Dearest ——"

"Or the second — or the third. Only it was the first time on the face — where it showed — I must have got hysterical — wiring Father — it happened before — being struck. My arms once. Terrible —— When Father's wire came saying I — might come home — I wouldn't if he hadn't suggested it. Laurie — you don't hate me for — for ——"

Fleta. Fleta. Fleta. How to make her not so craven. Darling girl.

The soft flesh of Fleta shaking with the sobs of those long years. Mother weeping into the luggage ——

"The very month Bobbie was born, Laurie, I never told it — what was the use then? — when I kept hoping — that month Laurie, he brought home one of — one of the women. His women. She — she was ill from being drunk and I — I had to prepare her coffee and fix the spare room — the new blue and gold room we had built on that year. I — I tried to stick it out — the children — for the children — you know — but Mother — but Laurie — I — that wasn't all — I — he — he ——"

Fleta's sobs. She was so bruised with them. You could feel the way they hurt her body.

"Daughter, daughter, we must make the best of this terrible thing that has come upon us."

Mother again, snorkling and blessing herself, her narrow shoulders made narrower by the gray wool shawl. Another of Mother's gentle tenacities. There was no use confiscating it and substituting one of the pretty warm colored shetland wool ones that you had knitted for her Christmas after Christmas. A gray one, looking full of prickles, found its way back again across the frail round shoulders. The identical gray of Mother's eyes. The gray of old water.

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"There is nothing to cry about, Mother. That's no way to greet Fleta and the children, dear. Come, your rooms are all ready for you. We've given you the second-floor spare suite. Come, Fleta, and take off your things and the children's."

"Your father, Fleta! He's waiting. Breakfast, you know."

Of course you knew. You all knew. Even the children. The little cortège of you winding solemnly down the narrow stairs to the basement dining room. Bobbie blond as a flame with his poor little constant croup. Bennet, great boy, locking his arms about his mother's throat for a ride down the stairs on her back.

The table was spread and the electric light over the side-board was burning and there was the stack of cups, piled, the way you detested them, at Mother's place and Kate with a sore-throat rag around her neck, carrying in the gold-and-white china coffee pot on the Dutch tile with the nicked corner, and Father seated in his enormous crouch with his face that hung down as low as a beard.

You sometimes had the feeling of Father carrying his long head in front of him as if he were holding up a lantern.

Hunchbacks' heads are hung in that peering fashion.

Father's back was not hunched.

Only very, very round.

Mother said it was that way from having lugged too heavy loads of peat when he was scarcely more than a six-year-old, on a rockbound farm out of Belfast. You sometimes wondered if Father thought of himself as a hunchback. You didn't. It just made him seem to be built as close and as powerful, as squat and as knitted as — you knew! When you let yourself think about it at all, way down privately under all the other thoughts. . . . You knew!

There was something in Father's squatiness, of a low powerfully built chimpanzee!

There was a great stone-hewn one guarding the gate of a

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country estate out near St. Vincent's. A broad-loined magnificent one. Like Father.

Sometimes, when you looked at Father to wonder if he thought himself a hunchback, it frightened you because you could not tear your eyes away from him easily. They felt riveted as if you were gazing into water and had an irresistible impulse to jump. The deep swirling waters of Father's eyes. Almost with lights in them. The dim reddish lights that burn under bridges.

"Father, here's Fleta and the children! Bennet — Bobbie, run, say hello to Granddad." Quick, quick, darlings, you said, spanking them softly forward: "Run to Granddad."

Quick, quick, you kept saying as if somehow there must be no time, in case Father should decide to be horrid. It hurt you again the way Fleta came into the room with her shuddering, looped-up smile and her hat farther back than ever on her head and her blue Regan eyes as if they were made of tears that could flow out of her. So eager. So craven. And the red welt that ran down toward her mouth.

"Children, don't muss up Grandpa—oh—oh, Father ——"

"Grunk-Grunk," said Father to Bennet and punched him softly in his little round ball of stomach with his right arm that didn't always respond since the stroke, and suddenly it was easier for Fleta to pass around and kiss him on the forehead and Mother was at unstacking the cups and you on your knees, stripping off Bobbie's little woolen leggings that tied up about his waist with a cord and tassel.

"The train was late, Father — the children were so restless —— Bobbie, come let Mother fix your napkin — no eggs for them, Kate — just cereal —— No, Mother, not that way. Let me. Bobbie, Bob-bie — don't let Mother have to spank ——"

Oh, how you wanted to be glad that Fleta was home. Fleta fiddling all day with the children as if she were tying

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the perpetual bows under their chins. You were glad in a way of course, now that you were going to be married and Mother and Father were to be alone in a house as deep as a cistern. Only somehow it wasn't quite that simple — Fleta's coming home with the children didn't break into the silence with laughter. But with bickerings that nicked it all up and made you nervous. Poor Fleta, you wondered at her actual physical strength to bicker at the children so. "Bobbie, do this. Bennet, stop that." Bobbie and Bennet. Bennet and Bobbie.

"You're an hour and twenty-two minutes late," said Father, fumbling with his square, numb fingers at his enormous silver watch which Victor finally had to put back into his pocket for him.

What Father really said was something that sounded like: youronehourntwintytwominutes la-a-a-ate.

But if you were family, you had learned since Father's stroke to dig the words out of the blur. There was still the soft coating of Belfast brogue along Father's speech. It was like a fur on the tongue. Even when Father was angry and the words stuck in clumps, that delicate swansdown was there.

"Your coffee, Regan?"

He took it from Mother without glancing and began, with Victor guiding his elbow, sprinkling in half a teaspoon of sugar. Father objected to loaf sugar.

Come to think of it, you could scarcely remember ever having seen Father really look at Mother. With his attention.

Kate, between serving the cereal, had to kiss the children. She was so old and the perpetual fever-blister on her lips not nice, and it made you feel a little sick, her kissing the children with her decayed-looking lips and the sore-throat rag around her neck that smelled of some horrid kind of plaster with turpentine in it.

Nobody seemed to mind but you, who hated ugliness so.

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It made you feel squeamish inside. Poor Kate who was like a blister. She made you feel ill, and yet you were always puttering about her. Applying, with your own revolted fingertips, ointment to her sore lips. Swabbing her perpetually sore throat.

You were like that. What was most horrid to you brought out all your pity and there you were, mixed up in what you shuddered back from. That was the worst part of it. You could no more have let Kate know that she made you squeamish inside. It was easier just to feel a little horrid and smile at Kate who for all the years of your life had made you not want your breakfast. Kate and the white of Mother's underdone egg and Frank when he came down with flaps under his eyes.

There were Father's eyes sliding now in that fec-fie-foe-fum fashion he had when Frank was about to be late for breakfast. At least Frank might have tried to be prompt this morning, when Father must be kept nice for the home-coming of Fleta and the children. You could see Father's jaw set in the way that looked as if the teeth behind were gritted. They weren't, though. Father's teeth were too short and square to clamp down in a grit.

"Mary, hadn't you better call Mr. Frank?"

There now, if only Mother hadn't said anything! It was her tremolo and perpetual trembling for Frank made Father seem to grit his teeth. Somebody in the family forever gritting at somebody. Half the time somebody raising gooseflesh on someone else. Over the same things that an outsider could do with impunity. One's near ones and dear ones with that curious capacity to offend. Mother with that tremolo in her voice, asking Mary to call Frank. It should have made you a little sorry for her. Yet for the life of you, you could only feel irritated. With Mother for the tremolo in her voice and her hands in among the coffee cups. You hated yours, spilling

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over the sides. And you were irritated with Father for the way he could torture Mother by torturing Frank. The edges of your teeth hurt. . . .

"Mr. Frank's clock must be slow, Kate."

Sly, pitiful Mother.

And then Father. Sure as fate. Bang. Bang. Bang. With his clumps of hands.

"Lock the door."

Kate standing with the muffin plate in the old, old attitude of her uncertainty. Mother already pinching the end of her nose with her handkerchief. Fleta with her catarrhal snorkle whenever she got nervous.

"Father dear ——" you tried, in just the key of remonstrance that could sometimes be effective.

"Lock the door!!!"

"Regan, on rainy mornings it remains dark so long. The boy didn't ——"

"Lock the door." Queer how Father never looked at Mother. You mustered up again.

"But, Father, the first morning that Fleta and the children are home —— Frank hasn't seen them yet."

Frank came in then. Must have been coming down the stairs in time to hear. There was something about him of the smallest kind of a boy. He was twenty-nine. He and Fleta had been adult ever since you could remember. It had always been a house of adults. To you at eighteen, Fleta seemed easily her thirty-six. But not Frank his twenty-nine. Sometimes the look in Mother's eyes when she regarded Frank crowded up around your heart and stayed there and hurt there. There never was anyone could seem so young as Frank. Not even Dudley, when he threw back his head to laugh and his face became foreshortened and the dimple came out.

When Frank walked into the dining room ten minutes late, with his hands in his slim coat pockets and his face with one

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of those hurried-looking, one-lather shaves, his tie careless, his soft shirt riding up a bit, and directed his eyes with the flaps out under them and the look of headache in them, at Father, it was as if Bennet and Bobbie, and now Frank, were all assembled. The children.

"Hello, Fleta," he said, and kissed her unemotionally, then the children and Mother. "Good enough. Welcome-home stuff, and all that. Morning, Dad. Laurie." Frank with his perpetually whitish tongue and look of too little sleep. He was so slim. Like a borzoi. His back insolent with being straight and narrow. Father's back with a crouch in it.

Curious how the children were all of the image of Mother when she had been loved. Mother whose loveliness now, though, had all run from her like the beans out of a bag. She was that limp and full of the creases of being empty. Fleta was as Mother would have been, if she had fattened out, instead of shrunk. Frank was like the picture of Mother that stood on an atrocity of an easel in the parlor. Mother when she had been fourteen and in Belfast. The one with the bangs and the loveliest slender face. Like a pearl quivering on a bangle. That had been Mother at fourteen. It was said that you, Laura, walked not only in Mother's beauty more than any of her other children, but in that beauty italicized.

You knew it, too, with the little purr that could ripple over you. Bobbie, too, was of his grandmother's fairness. All except Bennet, who was five. He was like a little gnome and if you looked at his back right hard sometimes, you were sure there was almost a knob coming through between the shoulder blades. Which was fantastic. There wasn't at all. Bennet's back was quite straight. As straight as Father's. It was just that his head — his head was hung on like a lantern!

Father never played much with Bennet or rumbled his hair the way he did Bobbie's, but then he had done that astonish-

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ing thing on Bennet's fifth Birthday when Fleta had been home with him on a visit from Albany. Transferred that fifty-six-thousand-dollar mortgage on a warehouse in Brooklyn to Bennet's name to be held in trust.

Almost as if Father were paying Bennet an indemnity for the head that was hung on like a lantern.

Father was at Frank again. The wet cold morning suddenly full of bicker. And such strange bicker. Frank's words clipped as if he could not wait to get the unpleasant things out of his mouth. Father's jargon that nobody except the family so grimly understood, all struck together and wanting to clamber out over the ridge of a thickening tongue.

"Aither come down to breakfast at the hour of self-respecting people, or go out and buy it somewheres where there's no regard for the dacency's."

"What is this, anyway, Father? A boarding school?"

"Frankie — please — don't argue with Father ——"

"It's not a school for loose ways of living. When me legs were carrying me, I was at me desk a good two hours before now. When I was your age, I ——"

"I'm not living forty years ago, I'm living to-day."

"As long as you're living in my house, as a dacent and self-respecting ——"

"Frankie — your egg — give Mr. Frankie a hot plate — Kate ——"

"Decent and self-respecting. You said it, Father. It's precious little claim I can lay to either, so long as I submit to remaining in this house under your ——"

"Frankie — your egg!"

"For God's sake, Mother, my egg! My egg! What about it? What about my three-minute semi-fluid mass enclosed in its thin but firm calcareous shell, to inspire you to fine frenzy?"

Frank's cruel way of bewildering Mother. You were so sorry for her and for Frank who was so goaded.

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"Give in to Father, Frankie, it's Fleta's first morning home, you ——"

"For God's sake, Mother, isn't it enough that you've forced me to submit all these years to the same old kind of bully wagging from Father? At least grant me the right to put up an argument for the last shred of self-respect I have left."

"Argument. If ye talked less and paid more attention to which way your nose is leadin' you, you wouldn't have time to sit over late breakfast arguin' ——"

"Don't muss up Aunt Laurie's hair, Bobbie — don't touch Aunt Laurie's pretty hair!"

The bicker of the talk. Here was what threatened to be a family row except for the usualness of it. The talk. It slanted against you pretty much as the poles of the rain slanted against the windows. You thought through it and you dug out your egg through it and you talked through the usualness of it.

Frank and Father bitterly bickering as usual.

"Regan, the first morning that Fleta's home! Frank, don't excite your Father the first morning Fleta's home."

"Fleta's no stranger here, Mother. She knows. She ought to. She was reared in it."

"Then the children, Frankie ——"

"They can't help knowing either, if they are to be brought home to live. This house is a sea of pitch with it. Self-respect. I haven't any for myself and I cannot expect any from ——"

"You're spakin' gospel there. It is only the man who can look himself in the eye, asking no man's favor and living off of no man's board and lodging excepting what he's earned for himse——"

"Bobbie, let Grandmother give you a little more cream on your cereal ——"

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The slanting poles of the rain. The slanting poles of the talk. The purpling little pools gathering under Frank's eyes and the way his nostrils clung together. Father being horrid to Frank and the flesh flashing along Frank's face in the way it had when he was being tortured by Father, and the look in Mother's eyes that clung to his like burs. Quick shimmer of the flesh. Like a horse shudders off the flies. There was one spot beneath Frank's left eye. Almost as if a sun spot were dancing along it.

"God knows, Father, I don't want to stay and eat your food and lie on your bed. I'd go off and dig ditches rather if — if — oh, what's the use! Hell."

The drone of what Frank had to say and his bitter and accusing eye on Mother. Mother knew! Frank who would go and dig ditches rather, if — if not for Mother! Who clung so. The same bitter and accusing eye of countless such scenes. No one raising his voice through the usualness. Kate slippity-slopping. Bobbie gouging up porridge with his fist clutched about his spoon and his little lips making sucking sounds. Mother with her futile hands, plucking, when Frank looked at her that way, at the little round dish-shaped hollow in her throat and looking back at him with her eyes that hung to him like burs. Pale blue burs.

"Earn. You talk of *earn*, Father."

"It's you do the talkin' of earning. It's me does the earning."

"Earn. I've earned my paltry salary fifty times over this one year alone in bitterness. In humiliation. In the degradation of having to sit down at your table and eat your food that I'm not welcome to, when it chokes me."

"There's a way to self-respect. It isn't the aisy way of lying abed mornings. It isn't the aisy way of belittling the world you was born into by feeling yourself too good for it. There's a way to self-respect."

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"Well, then, let me get it my way. You don't need me to run your lumber yards for you. You've told me that often enough and you're right. I'm about as fit to run your lumber business for you as I am to translate the Koran. If you needed me, I'd stand by. But you don't. Nobody can ever run anything for you as long as you live. Every man on the place knows I'm only a browbeaten, bullyragged figurehead and I can't sign an order for a dog license. I'm no good out there. I know it. Wasn't cut out for it. Any one of your foremen can do my job. Doheny can. Only better!"

Mother's eyes.

"No man who offers his resignation to the firm of Regan and Company need be afraid of having it refused. It's been me principle for thirty years, that no man that wants to go is worth the holding ——"

"Well, then, by God, I ——"

"Frankie!" The pale blue burs of Mother's eyes and Frank with his tortured way of trying to dodge them and that nervous little flashing of the flesh as if he would shake them off.

"I — you ——"

"Frankie ——"

"I — I — oh, what's the use! What's the use! What's the use!"

You felt so dreary. Here it was happening all over again just as if it had never happened before and would never happen again. Mother fidgeting at the little dish-shaped hollow at her throat. Father drinking in his oatmeal with Victor holding the bowl and his head quite low over the table. Frank swallowing through a constricted throat and Kate in and out placidly on shoes that went slippity-slop through the swinging door. Even Fleta, who had been practically away from it for many years, back at her old trick of pleating the tablecloth and flushing with the back of her neck as her head hung down.

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"Granddad," crowed Bobbie and beat upon the table with a fist that had a teaspoon upright in it. "Oof! Oof! Granddaddy!"

The slanting poles of the rain. You shivered at the prospect of eleven o'clock mass. You could almost taste the odor of the nave of mass and incense and the short steam that rises off wet woolens.

It was a day somehow to light a candle to your dear. Saint Margaret Mary. There was something small and quiet and neat about lighting a candle to-day to Margaret Mary. The resolution rested you and took the hurting away from the edge of your teeth.

Frank pecking Mother good-bye and letting his nerveless hand trail along your shoulder as he passed. "Frank — dear!" Kate, slippity-slosh. Father digging out his pipe and rousing its old cold smell. Mother stacking the cups with the pale tan remains of the coffee swishing around in them. Stacking them the way you hated.

. . .

There was an open fireplace in your own room. A solemn-looking thing the shape of the entrance to a tunnel. The year that Father had installed the hot-air furnace, all the other fireplaces in the house had been sealed with ugly embossed metal guards that sometimes fell in the dead of night with an immense clatter.

It was as if the old house could never stop its grateful thawing. Even with the warm new breath of the furnace flowing through rooms and hallways, the walls seemed to exude old cold. You ran through their chill, the way, as a child, you used to run through their darkness. They peppered you with gooseflesh on your dash from your bath back into bed. You who loved coziness.

Father had remonstrated about that open fireplace of yours

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and with the hot-air furnace blazing away, had forbidden Hilton to lug up coal for it. With your heart in your throat you had somehow managed to be sweet about it, when Father did that. Countermanding your order to Hilton there in your presence! Even Hilton looking sheepish with embarrassment for you. You could no more have talked, but sat with your eyes full of smile to gloss over the tears, and your lips lifted back, because they hurt one another.

You needed your gift of the power to smile through the blue coat of tears. Of course, mysteriously, the order had been rescinded and there were coals by the fireplace every morning and Hilton with a wise old smile as he went about it. And then Father getting sciatica that very next week and having to sit huddled beside it every day for two months, with your white eiderdown quilt over his shoulders and his eyes with the pink hairless basins around them like a chimpanzee's, looking at, but never seeing, the nicks and the knacks on the mantelpiece. Your rose quartz Virgin in the sandalwood shrine. Violets in December, from Dudley. A lavender bowl of them. A crystal elephant, Dudley's gift, hollowed for water and with tiny goldfish darting through its flanks. A snapshot of Frank, taken in Venice the year that Father had given him the ten weeks in Europe, with a group of Fordham College boys, standing with his back to St. Marks, and feeding pigeons. A photograph of Dudley in a silver frame, his hearty handsome face thrust out of the picture with his usual zest for life. Dudley's gift. Also a photograph of Fleta taken when Bennet was six months old and she was still slim and a lovely Regan. The clearest oval of Mother Agatha. Mary Walsh had had it done for you on porcelain from a photograph, for a birthday. It stood propped against a square of black velvet.

Father sitting there for hours before your cluttered mantel. Looking and not seeing. His long loose hands dangling down

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over the sides of the chair, barely clearing the floor, and his head, that came down like a beard, with that constant look somehow of being in advance of him. That lantern, peering.

It was warm in your room the day that Fleta came home and spiced with the smell of violets. If you placed your hand on the wall beside the fireplace it was the temperature of flesh. Not that it was chilly down in Fleta's rooms. Your skirts blew out if you stood on the floor-register and the children were taking their afternoon nap under light coverings. You had helped to bathe them. Soft sweetnesses; and Bennet had a bruise on his thigh which he had loved for you to rub. He had fallen asleep to your rubbing. But down in Fleta's room the light that came through the windows was cold. That was it. The color of the days, even the bright days, by the time they slanted down through the aisle of Eighty-second Street and into the house of Regan, was cold.

It was pleasanter on the white bearskin rug before your fireplace. It made the day a little pink.

Fleta, whose organdie and muslin dresses from a slim girlhood were still upstairs packed away in one of the storeroom trunks, seated wide-kneed now, in a low chair on the white rug, but next to the skin that had loved the organdies, a brown knitted slip-on sweater, so that the soft fat hung through the easy mesh with about the consistency of cheese being strained through a bag.

The little whirl of flame over coals. There were orchid taffeta curtains at your windows which helped to close in the pinkness. It made you feel cozy. When Fleta's knees were spread from sitting in a chair too low for her, they made a wide lap. A warm, sister lap. So that, sitting on the rug beside her, your head went back into the lap softly, and you could feel your neck come out in a young moon of a curve in front and your lids down, so that to see at all, you must look through a blur of lashes.

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You felt in a little haven. The haven of Fleta's lap. It was the overgrown, the voluptuous lap of a woman who had had eight children in eleven years. Eight of them so successively that only two of them had lived. Well, Mother had had eight, the five between you and Frank scarcely surviving their rubbings in oil.

Laps of the women who had paid with their bodies that there might be life. Fleta's widespread and rilling with flesh. Mother's with the deflated look of the empty bean bag.

You couldn't help it. Glancing down through the blur of your lashes at the slant of your own lap. Hips shaped like lyres. Imprisoned rhythm within the lyre of your body. You couldn't help it — grunting a little — little noises of wanting to purr of the loveliness of imprisoned rhythm within the lyre of your body. Lying there with your head back and the young moon curve to the front of your neck . . . it made you want to lie there perpetually — full of the untouched loveliness.

"Little sister," said Fleta, and leaned over to kiss you on the hair. The hair that you knew, when you purred, was the color of jonquils. Fleta was wanting terribly to cry. So much as squeezing her hand would precipitate tears. You could feel the little rumble to her body from holding them back. You were so sorry for Fleta. So hurtingly sorry. You could no more have helped squeezing. . . .

"Oh, darling," said Fleta, and sure enough began to cry in great sobs that got themselves caught in chunks in her throat.

Poor Fleta. "Dearest darling Fleta. Sister." Nothing ever cut through you so poignantly as your pity. Not even your love. For Mother. For Father. For Frank. For Dudley! It frightened you a little, except that your pity *was* love.

You told that to the Max sometimes.

Poor Fleta. You let her cry against your hair until one of the tears meandered down and joined your own.

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It must be terrible, to find yourself, as Fleta was finding herself, terrorized with the finality of Quin having finished with her and then her having finished with Quin and then the finality of another kind. The dreary finality of having to come back home.

You with your wings whirring and just ready for flight. Into marriage.

Fleta, who had returned with hers folded and clipped. Poor Fleta. It made you a little terrified. Fleta as a bride. You remembered her coming down the front stairs in her veil, with you all in white as flower girl. The loveliness of Fleta just before she had stepped into the car for the drive to the chapel. The untouched loveliness of her. . . .

"Laurie — is Father very angry?"

"Fleta, Fleta, you mustn't come back like this. Never let Father suspect that your spirit is broken. He'll torture you if he thinks you'll squirm."

"But, Laurie — after twelve years — to have found my own was a house of cards and to have come back — this way —"

"Fleta darling, what you must have suffered!"

"Suffered! You don't think Laurie — child — you don't think that it was just this one happening precipitated matters? Years and years of them, Laurie ——"

"And you never let us know. All these years. Not even the times I've visited you in Albany. Of course I suspected, dear. The time that you came home when Bennet was a baby. And then, too, I — naturally I knew, dear, certain things about Quin. One cannot be a woman and be around him and not know. But we never dreamed — things were so — so — terrible ——"

"Laurie, for years I have known that there have been other women. I realized fairly early in my marriage that I was one of the women who would have to compromise with life. So

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much of my married life, Laurie, I haven't been able to keep him entertained. Seven children in twelve years. Do you know what that means? Seven years out of twelve I have been married to him, being big and ungainly and ugly with child."

"But, Fleta, you needn't have ——"

"But I did. I was that kind of a woman. I wasn't wise. I wasn't even clever, and then of course inevitably when my attractiveness began to go, Quin became tired. It didn't matter that bearing his children was what destroyed me — if I had been a different kind of woman — if I had dared defy — dared — defy — everything and not have children when I saw how things were ——"

"Fleta!"

"Oh, never fear, Laurie. I had them. Thick and fast. It's in me too deep — like it's in you and in Mother. It isn't a matter of whether it's right or wrong — with us. We don't think about it. We just obey something that is in us too deep to analyze. It doesn't bear analysis. It's an emotion as big as life itself. If I — if I hadn't had all eight — even if the blind and the malformed ones had lived, I'd have been afraid — afraid that God would curse me and mine — and so I had them — and having them for Quin — destroyed me for Quin ——"

"Fleta — don't cry that way."

"I could have gone on. Maybe. Just closing my eyes. But after Bobbie was born and Quin knew from the doctor that there mustn't be any more — it wasn't that he really cared — it was just — there didn't seem to him to be any reason for subterfuge any more. He was so — so insolent about it. So terribly insolent. He thought, you see — he knew! — men sense those things — that I was one of the women who must go on compromising with what is left of their lives. And I would have, Laurie, I guess, if Quin hadn't gone too far.

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Overstepped every decency. He's always been that way. It'll kill him some day politically. Riding his power to death. His bringing the one into our home, Laurie, a notorious one-about-town, while Bobbie was down with croup, and commanding me to wait on her — and then — the horror of what happened when I tried to remonstrate — oh, Laurie — Laurie — what a bankrupt I am — what a bankrupt I am."

"Why, Fleta, so much of life is still before you!"

"Before me! It's as if I had killed someone to whom I am handcuffed and must go all through life — dragging — the corpse. No, no, Laurie. My life is behind me. Life in my children lies ahead, yes. But my personal life is dead. It died when I ceased to be a bride. Laurie, be greedy of your beauty. Not only keep it, but be sure that you are loved away and beyond it. Keep it as long as you can. But be sure that Dudley will love you from where it leaves off. Be selfish with it. Don't let life sap you, Laurie, and then throw you on the heap ——"

"Dearest, you were so lovely. Your picture at eighteen is exactly like Mother's when she was in Belfast."

"Take Mother ——"

"Fleta, it *is* that way, isn't it? You and Mother — the same."

"Precisely the same, Laurie. Mother's been sapped dry for twenty years. Long before you were born, Mother was beginning to fade with too much childbearing. Too much useless childbearing. Too close together. The six little ones dead between you and Frank. Think of that. Six times. A woman can't be out of health and nervous without running the risk, Laurie. Some women are big enough and clever enough. Not the average women, like us. Laurie — be wise — with your life. God must have meant it that way. Coöperate with your destiny. Don't submit blindly. Like I did. God must hate stupidity — like mine. Like Mother's."

"Mother. Fleta — dear. For years — ever since — one day

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riding out in the car — there's been a question I — I've wanted — I can scarcely bear asking it. Only — it seems to me there never was a time when I haven't heard it around. Buzzing. Always at convent — and even now — servants — Fleta, is it true? Has Father that — that other — family like us — out somewhere on Long Island, Fleta, how much do you and Frank and Mother know? Fleta — has he?"

Fleta with her underlip caught and a look on her face as if she had stopped breathing.

"Fleta?"

"What — a — terrible — question —"

"I've wanted to ask it for years, Fleta. I've never been able to before — for fear — I — Fleta, is it true? — I can bear knowing it, Fleta — it's curious, Fleta, how I can bear it — it's because I love him enough — Fleta, is it true? Is it? Is there another family like us — Fleta —"

Your lips that were singed with the asking.

"Fleta?"

Fleta's own lips. Such heavy-looking lips as if they were made of something viscous and would not pull apart.

"Fleta?"

"Laura, I don't know. Laura, I don't know. Never ask me that terrible question again. Laura, I don't know."

But you knew. But you knew! It made you somehow feel inside as if your heart were an hourglass with the sands and the tears running through and away. Fleta who would not tell. Fleta who knew so little of the pity in you for Father. The pity that should have been a little mingled with hate. Father with his head hung on like a lantern. Father who could be a little terrible. Love of him. It made you want to cry. The pity of Father. . . .

"Never ask me that terrible question again. Laura."

Fleta who could never understand that your pity and your repugnance for Father could be one, not two. Dear Fleta.

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Literally there was something warm about having her home again. Fleta shooing her children. Fleta with her wide lap. Wider than Mother's. The uncocked feeling it gave you to be sitting there on the white fur rug before the fire, with the poles of rain against the window and the little hiss to the fire. It was sweet sitting there with your head against Fleta. It made you want to tell you some of the things.

"Fleta, were you surprised when I wrote you about Dud? You had already guessed, hadn't you? Meeting him so often when you were here before?"

The little tightening of Fleta's hand where it burned through your hair.

"Yes, dearest — of course. Only it was so strange, hearing it from you. I mean — hearing it that way. Our Laurie — such a baby — going to be married."

"Fleta, why do you whisper that way?"

"Do I?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Laurie, be sure. That's all! Sure that you won't find yourself bankrupt some day like Mother. Like me. Sometimes I feel, Laurie — it's almost in the cards for us — we Regans — look at Aunt Tane — she was as lovely as you, Laurie — you remember the night she died — without absolution — hating Uncle — oh, Laurie — be sure ——"

"We love each other."

"Are you sure, Laurie, you aren't in love with being loved?"

"Dear silly, I'm in love with Dud. And Dud's love. Yes, that's being in love with love."

"Laurie. Curious girl, you! You've been such a child. I suppose it's because you're so much younger. That's why it seems strange. I cannot even remember the time when boys interested you the way they did other little girls. You hated dancing school because they touched you. You've been content to be just a daddy-adoring youngster while all the rest

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of us have feared him so. Wrapping him around your little finger. In a thousand ways, Laurie, you remind of Aunt Tane who wanted to be a nun. Little nun, you."

"Nun?"

"Don't you remember when you were very little how you used to play at being a nun? You remember, wrapping up in that old cashmere shawl of Mother's and swathing your head in towels. I think Father rather hoped once . . . men are like that, you know — the instinct to save their own women from the bestialities which they know lurk in most men."

"Fleta!"

"You're very far from that now, aren't you, dearest?"

"What?"

"The thing in you — oh, I don't know, dear. It's something I cannot quite analyze. I remember you, Laurie, on Easter morning at High Mass and then that time you were in Frank's little convent play 'Nun among the Lilies' and your fainting at your first communion — and then the time Kate's floor-oil ignited and started the blaze and you fought your way into your room for your Christus in the niche there — you are, Laurie, the most innately and deeply religious of any of us. More like Aunt Tane. We're pretty good churchgoers, Mother and Father and I — by habit of faith — but Laurie — little nun, you — somehow — you — it's silly, isn't it, to be talking this way? You're far from anything like that, aren't you, dear?"

"Rather an astonishing question to put to a young lady about to try to explain the exciting performance of being engaged to an exceedingly nice young man. Of course I'm very far away from that, Fleta. I don't know that I was ever very close to it — maybe during those years at convent. Sometimes I used to think that Mother Agatha was — I — think I would rather be Mother Agatha than anyone I know — except possibly — me — I — I can't explain it to you —

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the something in me — Nun among the Lilies — the something that — made me faint at first communion — I — you — what makes you think I could ever have been — that, Fleta?"

"I've been being silly, Laurie. You're white and sweet in a darling, earthy sort of way and I'm glad for you and Dudley, only ——"

"Only what?"

"Only nothing. Dudley's splendid."

"Fleta, I wonder if I *am* as happy as I sometimes think I am."

"You are, Laurie."

"He — he likes me very much, Fleta."

"Silly child. Imagine a beautiful white thing like you happening to just a plain everyday ordinary kind of nice chap."

"He thinks I — I'm beautiful."

"Little pagan."

"I am beautiful, aren't I, Fleta?"

"Oh, Laurie, don't be an idiot. You are! You know you are!"

"I suppose it's horrid saying it out like that. But I do know it. I've always known it. Rather, I should say, felt it. That's it. I feel beautiful, Fleta. Just lying down sometimes, I — I feel that I'm white and that the shape of me is — well, is nice, and that it's lovely to have a head that feels like mine — all tight and right with the feeling of being mounted the way a head should be mounted. Is it horrid and vulgar to say that? And peacocky? Fleta, why shouldn't one know — shamelessly — that she is beautiful, if she really is? Mother must have known it. You must have known it when you were beautiful, Fleta."

You could have bitten off your tongue at that last. It sent the color up over your face and you could see the red spread all over Fleta up into her overblown cheeks and the back of her neck with the fat ridges on it.

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"Fleta darling — I didn't mean —"

"Yes, Laurie, I knew," said Fleta, looking down at her too wide breasts that were flabby from childbearing.

. . .

There was this about Dudley. Just dressing for his coming got you into a fine glow. He was sure, even on the blandest day, to come into a room as if it were one of those cold stinging ones that cloud your breath and burn at the tips of your ears.

Dudley smelled like snow. Especially his hair. It was rough hair, the color of tan bark, and when you kissed it, always shyly, all full of split ends, that prickled.

It was all right kissing Dudley's hair now. As all right as kissing Father's. Only Dudley's was young and sweet and full of the outdoors. Like snow. When you put your lips down lightly, to please Dudley, and closed your eyes, it might almost have been Father's. Except for the split ends.

Dear Dudley. His kisses were not light. Like yours. You would have liked them better light. He pressed you until your waistline ached from leaning back. His lips pressing so firmly against yours, until you could feel them flatten out into something that blazed. Sometimes, but only rarely, the blaze went through you in a stab. But usually the way to wiggle away from Dudley was to put your two hands up against his coat lapels, and brace yourself to lean away. You wished he wouldn't breathe that way . . . there was something about it — well, there was something about it that was frightening.

But just dressing for him did get you into a fine glow. He loved your arms so, the way they came out of the little tulle puffs of sleeves in the blue Lanvin dress with the pearl trimming that Father had let you have for your birthday. A love of a dress. Dudley was forever kissing your bare arms where they came out from the frilled edge of the tulle.

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They were nicest there. Just beneath the tulle. They came out round and so cool at right the very tenderest part of upper arm.

Sometimes when Dudley kissed you there, the little stab did shoot through you. Quick and hot and breath-taking.

Dearest Dudley. You powdered your arms and twirled before the mirror in the pale blue Lanvin dress with its cloud of tulle. You felt like a swan. And when you flung up your arms and then curved them down from the wrists, they were like necks. The beautiful proud necks of swans.

The poles of the rain had ceased by evening, and in the parlor, the red rep curtains with the ball-fringe were drawn. They were knee-high-looking curtains that stopped at the window sills, giving the room the look of a gawk.

You hated those curtains. There were no draw cords and the rings grated on the poles and cut you in two. But there was nothing much to do about them unless you did something about the entire room. Just new curtains wouldn't help. There remained the horrific blue velvet divan with the arms the shape of jelly roll and the cherry-wood mantel with the fretwork balconies for bisque Lancelot and Elaine and the gilt, solemnly expensive pier glass between the windows and the odor of banana from off the gilt chair and the odor of quiet that had molded. There was no help for that, either. Not even the warm air that poured out from the furnace grating, nor spring cleaning nor incense sticks lighted and stuck behind the square Steinway, could help the smell of banana from off the gilt chair, or the smell of quiet that had molded.

It made you want always to sit with a scarf over your shoulders. It made your fingers feel dry, like Mother's. If you left open the folding doors to the back parlor it helped. But now since his stroke that was Father's office and you could hear him, puttering interminably over his desk, making guttural sounds to Victor and, with his poor clumpy fingers,

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scribbling figures on the backs of envelopes that he ripped open and made into scratch pads after every morning mail.

There was a china basket on the hall table where everyone threw old envelopes for Father's scratch paper.

Most of the time you loved being engaged to Dudley.

The evening of the day that Fleta came home, Dudley brought orchids. A flame of them for your belt. He kissed you while you pinned them on and he kissed you when you crushed the purple tissue back into the box. And he smelled like snow, even in the dull damp parlor that was the odor of embalmed quiet.

Ah me, Dudley! He could never seem to look at you enough, his bright reddish eyes seeming to cloud up and get thickish when he held you in his arms, almost as if a slow fluid were moving across them.

You like his eyes clear, the way they looked when he first came in from outdoors or sat and talked forestry to Father.

Of course, being engaged gave him the right to look at you like this. Sometimes it made you shiver a bit. And purr too. When Dudley's eyes lay along your beauty and thickened up, sometimes you hated it, and then again, so strangely, it was almost as if you could feel the contour of your body and the little shine of it all over you, like a glow.

The orchids were being crushed.

"Don't, Dud!"

"Laurie, Laurie, how beautiful you are!"

Sometimes Dudley said that fifty times an evening. You loved it. It made you seem to purr.

"Fleta's home, dear."

"I know. Let's talk about everyday things later. Let me hold you this way first. Quietly. I can't ever seem to look at you enough to last me in between the times I see you."

"You're a sweet boy, Dud."

"I adore you."

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"Don't say that. It's sacrilege. There's only one Adoration. Bad Boy! Some day I'm going to take you to mass with me. Every morning. Six o'clock mass."

"Laurie — even six o'clock mass — after hours and hours of the preciousness of you — close ——"

"Dudley!"

"Darling, I love your crossing yourself for my sins."

"You are my great sin."

"You don't mean that."

"I know I don't, dear old dear, you."

"Sometimes, Laurie, you know I think you do mean that I am your great sin."

"Why?"

"Oh, I know you care for me and all that. As much perhaps as you can care — for any man. Laurie, how much can you care?"

"As much as I care for you, Dud."

"How much is that?"

"Six bushels, the way I used to say to Father."

"I want you to love me, Laurie, the way I love you. Passionately. With every single blessed inch of you. I want you to want to kiss my eyes in and in, the way I do yours, and to want to hold me until you almost break and to want to crush your lips right down into my very heart when I kiss them. That's the way to care, Laurie. Through you and through you, like a knife! Can't you care that way, Laurie? For me? Can't you want to be perpetually in my arms as I want you there? Laurie?"

"I — think I do, Dudley dear, in my own way."

"Good God, Laurie, I'm not ashamed of it. I want you there, perpetually. I think you're the most beautiful job God ever finished. I'm just off my head about you. Can't that be your way of liking me, Laurie? Laurie, what *is* your own way?"

Your own way? Why — why — you didn't know, except

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— most of the time it warmed you to be loved as Dudley loved you. You loved having your arms loved for their swaniness, and the look in Dudley's eyes, even when it thickened, made you feel all the lovely contour of yourself. Sometimes, too, the little stab shot through you. Almost the same kind of ecstasy that had made you faint that time at communion. But your own was not Dudley's way. Often you felt suddenly the same soft rushings for Father. The rush of wanting to cry for Father and embrace his hung-on looking head with knowing how he hated being cruel, and yet despite himself *was* cruel. Actually there was something akin in the way you felt toward Father and toward Dudley. And yet of course remote. Sometimes, with Dudley, it was like cuddling a small boy. Bobbie or Bennet. As if you could never get done with holding him in your arms because he needed you. It was fine being needed. . . .

There were so many ways of loving. There was the gorgeous, the private, the secret way you loved Him as he lay slanting off the lap of the Mary of the marble Pieta on the parlor table. His hurt legs. Secretly, privately, adoringly, you could have torn your heart to shreds to bind them.

That was your way of loving. Hurting. With almost an ecstasy. Hurting at Father, who was mean and wanting secretly, in his shaggy old heart, not to be mean. Hurting for Dudley, who somehow, when his head came down on your shoulder and you felt with your lips the rough, snow-smelling hair with the split ends, seemed like a small boy, needing you. Hurting ecstatically because His body, white and drained there on the Mother lap on the parlor table, was so tired. . . .

"Laurie — Laurie — what is your way of loving?"

How could you make him understand? Your way of loving — the way of wanting to take care of Dudley; the way of wanting to take care of Father. You wanting to take care of him in the same way that you could have torn your heart to shreds to bind the hurtings. . . .

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There was no way of telling Dudley that. You hadn't the words. It was all mixed up with your secret of the private, gorgeous ecstasy that had made you faint at communion.

. . .

Father was creaking about the back parlor behind the folding doors. You hated it. That feeling of Father eternally watching someone. It was as if the folding doors breathed.

Dudley didn't mind. All the little laugh wrinkles could come out, without Dudley appearing even to smile.

"I hear the old man's on night watch!"

Dudley's irresistible gayety. It was just the one way to carry it off. Even when Father pushed back the folding doors and came in and had Victor lower him slowly to the bulge of armchair and sat there with his hung-on head lifted a little, as if to compute the passing of the kilowatts of electric light, his mouth a little cruel and his eyes, in their pink pans of flesh quick and almost simian with being watchful. Dudley, though, could carry it off!

"Well, Mr. Regan, this is better weather for the forestry department than it is for rheumatics, isn't it?"

Father never answered a pleasantry. All their lives, the Regans, especially the women, had suffered under Father's never answering a pleasantry. Mother shaking her head and laughing in a high nervous way not usual with her, to fill in Father's dour way of never answering a pleasantry. Sometimes, indeed, poor Mother's head seemed palsied from trying to divert people from the hurt of Father's dourness.

"Congenital distemper," Aunt Tane had called it.

Bitter, stormy old Aunt Tane who had buried a husband and two daughters, beheld her brother caught in the slow vise of his first stroke, and then gone off to a convent sanatorium to die herself. All within the year.

But Dudley knew the secret of not letting Father make him

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feel small. Woe when Father made someone feel small! That someone *became* small. Literally, it was as if you could see him shrink. That was the dreadful part. It was hard not to feel a little disgust for the someone whom Father made small. And that was terrible. Frank whom you loved and admired, seeming so often to be small. Mother. And now Fleta again, who was to be home. The young men who had used to come to call, before Dudley. Suddenly when Father came into the room, it was horrible to see them become small. Of embarrassment. Of discomfort. Of scrutiny. Of course it was Father's fault. But yet, there they were. Made Small.

Not Dudley. He had a way of spearing Father's interest with one quick thrust. Father had laid the foundation of a great fortune up around the lumber camps of the Mackenzie River. Dudley had spent the first fifteen years of his life there.

"Well, Mr. Regan, I see where the commission is after you fellows on that redwood proposition." Dudley was quick and young and sure, too, at breaking up Father's clumps of words.

"Thim fellows have as much chance of making reserve territory out of thim woods as you have of becomin' President of the United Sta-a-ates."

"Why, Father, Dudley may be President yet!"

"So may me hat!"

"What your father means, Laurie, is, that as a born Canadian, I disqualify for that high office."

"Her Fa-ather means exactly what he says."

"Precisely. That my chances for becoming President of the United States are not one whit better than the chances of your father's high hat."

"I should loathe Dudley being President, Father. Presidents get assassinated and things."

"It's nothing short of one would be good enough for him as President!"

"Hear, hear. Many a true word spoken in jest, Mr. Regan."

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"Jest. If you think I am jesting, young man, come and ask me over agin for the hand of me daughter."

"Father, stop teasing ——"

"Your dad's right, there, sweetheart. If I was good enough for you, they'd have me in plaster of paris stuck up in one of those saint's niches you burn your little candles to."

"But, Dud, I couldn't reform you then!"

"There ye have it; the secret of all the fool wimmin in the world. Marrying a man to reform him. Trying to make silk purses out of the sows' ears of us."

"Sir! I resent the implication!"

"You do, do you!"

"Dudley — stop it!"

"I do. I resent the inclusion of my future father-in-law with me in the sow's-ear category. A potential silk purse salutes the finished product."

Dear Dudley! Who but Dudley could make Father, who would not laugh, at least sit back like that and squint his amusement? Father to whom all men, where you were concerned, were black with the seven deadly sins. The seven deadly sins of wanting you.

Sometimes Father tapped twice with his cane for Victor and shuffled out on one of these high places of Dudley's irrepressibility. Shuffled with the soft dragging noise of a mop. Sometimes he just sat and squinted, sucking his dry pipe and hanging on with his gaze to you.

It always hurt, that soft dragging noise of Father going off to bed. It hurt you because you were glad to hear him going. It left you alone with Dudley, who was so alive, that when he scooped you to him close, it was as if you could hear his body sing, of being vibrant.

"Dudley dearest, you mustn't mind Father. He doesn't mean you, particularly. It is just because he has always felt that way about all men where I am concerned."

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"He's right, Laurie. There's no man living worthy of you."

"Don't be silly, Dud. It's too funny to see Father with you. He hated giving in so. He tried so hard to find flaws. Some reason why he shouldn't say yes. And then when he had scouted about and found that you weren't a horse-thief or an ex-convict or a pauper, but just everything in the world you should be, he gave in so ungracefully. Someone told him, Dud old dear, that you had the name for being seen out with more good-looking girls than anyone else in town. That you loved them and ——"

"I do, sweetheart."

"You should see Father clutching at that straw. He's an idea, I think, in the back of his head, that he won't ever admit, that he wants to keep me in cotton wadding."

"I understand what's eating the old man. There's something to his point of view. There's something about you, Laurie — oh, I don't know's I can put it in words — there's something about you — not exactly just your beauty — but — well, there's something about you, Laurie, that a mere fellow like me isn't entitled to."

Dudley who had modern luxurious offices in Wall Street and drank sometimes a few too many highballs with Jerry Walsh and was known by name to every head waiter in town, and who kept a box of long black fragrant cigars in the tonneau of his speedy roadster for traffic cops; hale, well-met everyday Dudley, saying a thing like that. It was a lovely thing to say.

"Why, Dudley. . . ."

"In a way, Laurie, I feel pretty much about you, as your old man does. I don't ever want you touched or marred or — I don't know, Laurie, but it's pretty much beyond an ordinary fellow's belief. To come along one day and find your beauty his very own, the way I did."

"I love being beautiful for you, Dudley."

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"Your whiteness! Sometimes I think you've got me snow-blind."

"And I love being that white for you."

"And when you stand there — now — like a vase. Laurie, I'm foolishly, idiotically in love with every beautiful inch of you."

"Purr-purr," says kitty.

"Laurie, Laurie, can't you understand why I want to kiss your eyes in and in? They're so blue. Lakes. If a poor fellow were to find himself drowning in them he'd be drowning of blueness."

"Two blue lakes for you to drown in of blueness."

"And guess what I see reflected in them?"

"What, Dudley? Me own shining white spirit, of course!"

"No. I see me reflected!"

"Dudley, Dudley, am I all just white to you? Flesh?"

"Sweetest flesh."

"Not just flesh, Dud ——"

"I'm a man, Laurie. I love you."

"And, Dudley, I do love you."

You could not help it. The sweetness, sometimes, of lying there in Dudley's arms, feeling the lovely contour of yourself that his eyes were cloudy with.

It was not yet ten o'clock when Father began to thump with his cane from the bedroom above the parlor. At eleven o'clock Dudley left. The rain had ceased and you stood on the top step of the stoop and shivered in the hug of your own arms and stamped your thin slippers while Dudley climbed into his low, wine-colored runabout with its sporty-looking wind-shield shaped like a huge pair of spectacles, and drove off.

Your lips, still crushed from being kissed, had a little sing to them.

. . .

There was a light in Fleta's room. Oh, suddenly, it was unconditionally nice having Fleta at home! You turned out

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the lights, except the hall one for Frank, and ran upstairs, with the breathless, half-afraid little rush you always experienced in the dark.

How nice! How dear and how nice having Fleta home to talk with after Dudley had gone.

Fleta was in the children's room seated beside little Bobbie's bed whose fat little hand lay upward on the coverlet. But Mother was there too, in her gray flannel dressing gown and her pale tired hair hanging loose in a dismal kind of aura.

They had been crying, Mother and Fleta, there beside the children's beds, and their faces that had been lovely, were full of little gutters made by identical kind of tears.

Suddenly the little sing against your lips died down and the desire to confide, deliciously, died too.

Mother and Fleta whose lips had been so lovely, and now were just gutters for tears.

. . .

It was curious being engaged. Mother and Fleta hung on to you so with their eyes. The eyes of Fleta and Mother in their anxiety for the rightness of things. It made being happy seem just a little gauche.

It was as if Mother and Fleta, sitting so constantly together, while you were off dancing at tea-time with Dud, or motoring, or having a gay foursome with Mary and Jerry, had been saying together all afternoon exactly the same thing and were only repeating it for the againth time, when you came bounding into the room.

"Dudley is all that anyone could wish. If only ——"

If only! If only! If only what? You knew. If only one could be sure. Father who never looked at Mother. Fleta home with the children and her lips gutters for tears. Tears over Quin. Mother and Fleta with the blue all run out of their eyes. Even Frank shook Dudley's hand limply as if it were a damp rag.

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The fear full eyes of the family. Full of all of the motes of fear for you who were by ten years the youngest child. Not so much fear, as suspicion. That was it! Mother's beauty which Father had adored, as empty as the bean bag with the beans spilled out, and Father who never looked at Mother. Fleta with her old lovely contour, as you remembered her walking down the front stairs in veiling, lusterless now, and in crazy bulges, from too much childbearing. Father to whom all men were no better than one man and that man himself. Father and the legend of that other family, which your heart told you, in stabs, was true legend. Even Frank, with his long twitching poet's face, who seemed to like Dudley, and yet whose hand was as limp as a rag when he congratulated him.

You had to transcend with your fine spirits, all of their fear for you. It was fine to love Dudley for all of the reasons that could never be conveyed, even to him, but that nonetheless were like the beats of your very being. Like the pulse in your wrist or the little soft sink to the flesh of your cheek when Dudley kissed it.

Sometimes, and it made you ashamed, you almost wanted Dudley to be a little ill or a little tired or a little less bang full of vigor. Like Father, with his dragging leg, for whom you could feel your heart twisting when he was mean, all the while wanting not to be mean. Or Frank, when he had a headache. Or there on the parlor table. That drained-looking beautiful body that lay fainting against the Lap.

You wanted to be a Lap somehow for Dudley — to bathe his tiredness in the deep waters of your heart. Tears.

That was the way you cared. . . .

There were certain things you dreaded Dudley to know. Not that in the end it mattered. It was, in fact, part of his belonging. It wasn't really that you minded the big things about home that Dudley must know. Fleta's long-delayed separation, for instance, and the conditions of her final home-coming.

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Frank's incompatibility with Father. The affair of Father's big lawsuit over a tenement-building violation and last year's court decision that had cost Father eighty thousand dollars and costs.

The legend of Long Island City . . . you wondered sometimes through the stabbings of being sure it was true, if Dudley knew that.

It would only have made him seem dearer. Nearer.

It was the little things you dreaded Dudley knowing. But you knew that in time Dudley must know the little things. The horrid little things. They made you feel hot all over. Father who made over the fifty-six thousand dollars to Bennet on his fifth birthday, prowling about since his stroke, in the refrigerator after Kate had gone up to bed, to estimate inroads on eggs and butter; counting each piece of laundry when it came home and ever watchful of who left an unnecessary electric bulb burning. Mother's little habit of chewing along her front teeth and Father who never seemed to look at Mother, masticating along his, to ape her. And then Mother, pitifulness of that, always startled, shifting around to chew limpingly on her molars, which hurt her.

You knew already that Dudley knew that, for certain. Mother's eyes could dart around the table so startled and her napkin brush at her mouth.

And Dudley must know too by now, just from having been around, how perpetually nervous Mother made Frank. And you! And you! Although you kept it jammed down inside you so securely. Smiling at Mother when every little nerve end was like an open mouth shrieking.

Mother's blue eyes that could cling to Frank's like burs and would not brush off. Sometimes, when Frank, who had no appetite, pushed back his scarcely touched plate, you could anticipate Mother's little trick of nibbling a bit off her own stalk of celery or piece of white meat and placing it lightly over on Frank's place.

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Queer that Mother could never see his distaste for that act and the way he pushed his plate even further away then. And you too felt some of that distaste. That was the worst of it. You could cover it up with a smile, and the pity you felt for Mother would no more have let you push that plate away as Frank did — but — Mother's futility. Mother's futility!

It was a matter of being perpetually unhappy about Mother one way or another. Of being horrid to her in infinitesimal ways, underneath the smile, and of being unbearably sorry for it if you woke up in the middle of the night, or suddenly, while you sat next to Dudley in theater, remembering a little gesture of irritation, or while you were saying Hail Marys suddenly feeling the flood of remorse over Mother.

Time and time again, when you were away from her, the pain of having been horrid to Mother, even with your secret impatience. And yet time and time again, once you were with her once more, being secretly horrid to Mother all over again. You couldn't help it. You couldn't help it! Mother did that to one.

You could have bitten and bitten off your tongue for all the times you had shuddered in with your breath and said:

"Oh, Mother dear, you've asked me that same question six times this morning. I don't know where I'm going! Just for a walk. Please — dear — don't keep asking in that singsong ——"

You *did* know where you were going! Only perhaps to Shinasi's, to see the proofs of your new photographs. Mother would have enjoyed that. You knew it, too. And yet, for the life of you, there seemed no way you could help being all goosefleshed at being asked by Mother's singsong where you were going. You knew how sorry you would be afterward for having been horrid to Mother and yet there you were again. Horrid. Horrid.

Dudley must have noticed, your pretending sometimes not

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to hear one of Mother's bleaty little futile questions. Raising your eyes to heaven at Mother perpetually asking the same little futile bleaty one over again. Answering: "I don't know, Mother," when you did know.

Time and time again, it was part of your confession.

There was a little prayer, too, before the Max.

"Beloved Son of Mary, help me to be nice to Mother. Jesus, Son of David, Jesus, Son of Mary, Beloved, help me to be sweet to Mother and kind to Mother as Mother is sweet and kind always. Jesus — Son of Mary — Beloved — help me."

All the little odds and ends of your prayers. They were as manifold as the odds and ends of colored ribbons from favors and corsages and candies, that you kept in the taffeta-covered boxes on your dressing table.

You had no set prayers. They always gave you the sense of reciting from a platform and lay half forgotten along with your catechism and your parables. You wondered, sometimes, if in the impromptu chattiness of your prayers and the absence of the *thees* and the *thous*, there could be something of sacrilege. And yet how could that be so? When you prayed — even the most informal and the slightest of them — you were all out in a rash — an ecstasy — the ecstasy of adoration. . . .

There were countless little prayers that you ran daily with to the Max. There was one for Dudley too.

"Jesus. My Jesus. Help Dudley to love me — as You love. Keep me beautiful for him. But make him love the spirit more than he loves the flesh, Jesus. My Jesus! So that when the flesh fades, love can endure. But Jesus — my Jesus — keep me beautiful for him."

The eyelids of the Max. Sometimes when you moved about at the casual chores of dressing yourself, or lay on your bed like a great cat, they seemed to quiver . . . having them open upon you would be enough, you imagined, to kill one of the ecstasy. . . .

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Sometimes you had thoughts that peeped out and then scurried into their holes like frightened mice.

Thoughts about being you. Thoughts about yourself. And Dudley. It wasn't just enough to love Dudley so that you wanted him to be a little tired or a little ill or a little less bang full of vigor.

That was the love of pity that you felt for Father and Fleta, for Frank and for Mother. For the lame people you passed in the street and the women of dreadful finery who lurked in doorways in the side streets of downtown after theater time.

The way to love when you were engaged, was the way Dudley did when he held you to him in the one-step until you could almost feel his entire body breathing at you.

The way to love. That was when the thought scurried back. All the ways to love that were soon to be sanctified by your marriage, but which were shameful now. You could not help thinking about them. A little. You wondered and were afraid. For Dudley. How to feel Dudley's way. Sometimes you did, a little, in the one-step.

. . .

Every evening that you did not remain at home to sit with Dudley in the parlor that smelled of quiet, you went dancing.

There never was anyone matched Dudley for joy in the dance. He breathed hard. He held you tight. He was forever, of animal spirit, strumming his fingers on table tops and humming and throwing his shoulders.

When Father demurred, you kissed him roundly on the mouth.

All the girls went dancing. They did it naturally as they smoked in the locker rooms at convent, or sat in public places and made enameled-looking bow-knots of their mouths with lip stick, or wore their hair docked, or rolled their stockings and let their bare knees flash when they crossed them.

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Smoking made you feel wry and you only did it sometimes to please Dudley who could be immensely amused at what he called the little rabbit way your nose had of puckering. Your lips, without benefit of lip stick, were a raspberry red all their own, but you did roll your stockings. You rolled them after the fashion of your generation, but sometimes when you danced you could feel your knees flash and that made you flush and want to sit down.

Your generation — it was something more than a cigarette or a lip stick divided you from it, or the fact that you wore your hair bound to your head, like a wimple.

It was the something in you made you love to think about the faces of the women the old Italian masters loved to paint! Something slow, something eternal, something as deep as a pool. There was an entire aisle of primitives in the chapel at St. Vincent's.

When you thought of your generation at all, incongruously and irrelevantly, the row of these tranquil faces hung themselves before you — oval clear —

Your generation. It was all right if you liked things with your heart. Dancing with the moist imprint of men's hands against the bare small of your back. Sipping cocktails out of teacups until it became easy to laugh.

You hated yourself when it became easy for you to laugh. But you knew, and Dudley knew it before you knew, that when it became easier for you to laugh, it was easier to feel the way Dudley felt about being engaged. In the one-step. Until you could almost feel his entire body breathing at you.

. . .

There never was, though, anyone so fragrant as Dudley. Just health fragrance. The fragrance of firm buoyant flesh. If only when you danced Dudley wouldn't hold you crushingly close. Sometimes when it was easy to laugh, you could seem

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to like it well enough. But generally — you weren't made that way. To like it that way.

You knew that it made you just a little queer. Mary Walsh minced no words with you. Mary had told you all there was to know. While she was engaged to Jerry. After she married. And when her baby was born.

The way to love Dudley was not just the way of loving Father or of wanting to hold him if only he were weak or wounded or needing. Like the Figure on the Lap in the marble Pieta.

Dudley unconventionally gave you a snow-white ermine cape for your eighteenth birthday with a high ruff of fox around the collar and great mandarin shaped sleeves with more of the enormous-pile, white-fox for edging. It made you feel like a jonquil stuck into a snowdrift. You loved to wrap it tight about and feel its smother. Dudley would kiss you down into it until your head disappeared completely into the drift.

Dudley loved you in that coat. You had a blue velvet one with a gray mirabeau collar that Father had let you have at Easter and a lovely orchid chiffon one lined in gold caracul that Fleta had given you at graduation from St. Vincent's. But all the winter that Dudley and you were engaged, you wore the white one. To theater. To the Westchester afterward to dance. To the Midnight Supper Club. Dudley unwrapped you of it before you sat down, as if you were an urn, being unswathed. Dudley was the one who put it that way. You were an alabaster urn that had been wrapped away in ermine cotton-batting. There was always a little hush when Dudley released you from the lovely smother of that wrap. It made you want to purr, standing there beautiful in that moment of little hush. Being beautiful for Dudley and yourself and for all the people on the edge of that hush.

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It was nice feeling the contour of your own loveliness. If there was something not nice, you couldn't seem to achieve a sense of shame about it. The oval, sainted-looking women on the primitives must have known their loveliness. They were so quiet, the wise slow-eyed creatures. And in that quiet must have known.

Dudley had a beaten silver hip flask with an emerald screw-stopper that his partner Jerry had given him the year the firm bought its seat on Change. You drank mineral water, tinged from this hip flask to amber. The deeper the amber, the easier it was to laugh. And the easier to feel the quick mystery of shiver when Dudley's hand jammed itself in a living plaster on the naked V between your shoulder blades. And the shimmer of the jazz. It ran along your legs. Along your shoulders, through your arms to your finger tips. It made you begin to feel, if you let your eyelids droop and Dudley's breathing raise a little nap along them, some of the things you knew you should feel. Like Mary Walsh.

. . .

The winter that Fleta came home and you were engaged to Dudley, Frank was often ill. The ills of his discontent, no doubt, but they took the concrete form of a cold that settled obstinately on his chest and a cough that could rattle through the house dead of night, like a chain. The gray wraith of Mother in her gray robe and her hair in its dismal aura, in and out and out and in of Frank's room six and seven times a night. Frank at best slept restlessly and plunged off covers. It was as if Mother could never have enough of tucking him in. In the dark without even speaking to him. The gray wraith of Mother. In. Out.

Then, when he finally threw off the cold, one of the lumber trucks, making for the yards, skidded and crashed through the office window in a hail of flying glass. Frank received a

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cut so near the jugular vein that he was two weeks recovering from loss of blood.

Poor Mother, Frank was so constantly cross with her for an apparently irrepressible habit of lifting back the bandage to peer at the jagged wound and finally Father forbade her to curl up on the cot at the foot of Frank's bed and a nurse was arranged for, a young woman, Miss MacAfee, with a flare of red hair and one of those startlingly contrasting white skins, who soon learned to ignore Mother's questions as if they were so much silence, shutting her, on flimsiest kind of pretext, out of the room for hours.

After this accident, there was scarcely a week that Frank did not come home one day or another, looking positively a sort of marine blue with a headache. You suspected the headache of being Frank's easiest explanation for the intolerableness of his days at the Yards. Yet Mother fussed so that you wondered why Frank ever came home to endure it. It made everything seem a little ridiculous. The sal volatile. The smell of camphor ice. Mother looking grayer than the gray pug of her hair. There in the gloom of Frank's room. Puttering. Puttering. And forever at tucking in the covers, and Frank so worn by her nervous frazzle that he positively yapped at her.

And yet, let her so much as leave the room and there he was after her.

"Mother?"

"Yes, yes, son. Here I am. What is it?"

"Nothing, I just wanted to know where you were."

"I was hurrying down to make you a cup of tea, son. Laurie — you go. Frank wants me here."

"No. No. Mother, who said I did? For God's sake, no!"

But strangely enough, he did. Lying there with his closed eyes crinkling whenever she happened to sit looking at him, as if the burs pricked.

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He apparently liked having Mother there, even while she crazed his nerves.

It was pleasant talking to Frank toward the twilight of these bad days of his. He would get all right quite suddenly. Throw off the coverings. Fairly shout Mother out of the room and first thing you knew, be smoking a fast necklace of cigarettes and walking up and down the room with his hands plunged down into the pockets of his green velveteen dressing gown.

Frank was handsome in the clear Gaelic Regan way. The highland fairness that Mother carried in her strain was out in Frank. His delicate profile with the perpetual quiver to it of a horse in fine fettle. But so nervous that the corner of his mouth, from always chewing at it, kept having fever sores. Ever since you were old enough to hurt for Frank, you had felt older than he.

The boyhood he had endured through Father's taunts!

The meals he had gulped down through Father's taunts!

Sometimes you wondered. Was there something after all in what Father said? How could Frank, detesting the business, continue to endure the life at the Yards where as general manager he could not so much as discharge a truckman without telephoning for Father's confirmation? The life at home, where the meals seemed literally to choke him? Why did Frank endure it all? Was Father's accusation true? Was it the prospect of inheritance? . . .

You knew that it was not. Frank would leave his monthly salary check lying about his room until Mother sent you over to the Eightieth Street branch bank to cash it and then doled it out to him in the small amounts he needed from day to day. He was that way about money. Losing it. Leaving it. Lending it. Giving it. The idea of Frank as the ultimate head of the Regan Lumber Company or the Nager Sisal and Manilla Rope Company, another organization of Father's conducted

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under the alias of the family name spelled backward, was fantastic. It kept Father's mouth bitter. The high and angry words that had rung between Father and Frank. The years of them. Especially since Father's stroke and Frank had left Fordham College in his junior year to go into the business.

Frank could be abominable to Mother, but you suspected that there was only one reason he had stuck it out. The gray fluttering eyes of Mother. Pale moths that could seem to light on your own lids and prick there.

You knew so well, the feeling.

Most of the time Frank talked to you about his plays. You. Who were not clever. He must have found in you a sounding board. To talk against. You could be that! A vibrant one with being sympathetic. It made you and Frank very close. Sometimes for hours, and knowing you did not always understand, he talked into your silence. The silence that was crammed with your love and sympathy for Frank.

There were stacks of plays in their blue covers, spread out along two closet shelves. There were his earliest attempts, in the loose handwriting of a schoolboy. Picaresque dramas, full of pirate lingo. A five-act masque in blank verse compiled in collaboration with Ashfurth Ropps, when they were seventeen. A half finished novel. A finished version of Coleridge's *Christabel*. A morality opus, *Nun among the Lilies*. Your favorite. You had carried it to Mother Agatha and it had been performed at convent.

And then the something adult had happened. It started, you believed, when Frank began to read Ibsen. He was forever sending you to the neighborhood branch library for *The Doll's House* and *The Master Builder* and one day he acquired the entire set for himself.

The Doll's House filled you with fear.

In a way, although so remote of course, it made you look at being engaged to Dudley with something of the fear that lay

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in the eyes of Mother and of Fleta these days when they looked at you . . . and yet that was just what they were wanting for you — a doll's house — you wondered sometimes if you wanted any house — except — sometimes when you were tired and a little bewildered you thought of Mother Agatha — her house was so in order. . . .

Frank's plays. There was always his newest, obliterating the disappointments of the older ones on the closet shelves. He could talk them to you for hours. Pacing up and down, his face seeming to get lean like a blade. Sometimes it made the back of your neck ache. Listening. There had been so many. On the days when Father had let you have the car, you had even called for some of them for Frank in theatrical offices around Broadway and waited in crowded anterooms until an office boy came out and usually deposited a heavy square envelope with a small bang in front of you.

Once, a celebrated producer with a silver head as benign as Father Herndon's, and somehow the look of priest to him, had tilted up your face by the chin as he passed you waiting in one of these offices, and regarded you with the contemplative eyes of a wise buyer at a horse fair.

Were you looking for an engagement?

No. No. You were calling for your brother's manuscript.

Well, some day if you wanted an engagement, you might call around. Beautiful Child.

It made you smile while you waited. Presently the boy brought out the play. *Sea Girt*. There were so many of them. *Angels*. *Morals of Conrad*. *Romance of Two Streets*. *The Spectator*. *Madelaine*.

The last you had cried over. *Madelaine* was a *Magdalene*. Frank liked it best of his best plays. For a while a producer had thought seriously of presenting it. But finally the theme had intimidated him. You could never tell which way the public might swing in these *Magdalene* plays. The wives

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wanted the wages of sin to be paid in the usual coin. Husbands were more inclined to be lenient.

But you could never tell. . . .

There was one scene, a bold one of Madelaine on the streets literally soliciting, with Frank's lines invective against the men who made possible the plying of the trade. Demand and supply.

It cut you like a knife, that scene. Pity. And yet you could not understand that there could be revulsion from an audience. Your hands went out to her to — the Magdalene — your hands, and your pity could rise in your throat like a white fog to choke you.

But you still loved best the little morality play, "Nun among the Lilies." It was of six virgins who had sought Him out in all the high places of mount and temple. But finally to a melody as simple and as thin as a lute's, they found Him in a carpenter's shack at the end of the lane of lilies.

One of Mother Agatha's girl's clubs had acted it in the vestry room. But by that time, Frank, who was already in his second year at Fordham, got ashamed for fear the boys might rag him about it, and would not so much as be present.

You had been one of the virgins. Six little lay sisters of you. And you had worn wimples. Sometimes you could awaken at night, still feeling the light little hug of yours. Like a chalice for your head. And the lane of the lilies. Mother Agatha had sent you and Mary and a girl named Genevieve Lanahan down to a Church Supply Company on West Twenty-third Street for the lilies. Cotton ones with hard yellow calyxes. But they had not been cotton that afternoon. You could feel the living flesh of their petals as you walked through them. To Him. Genevieve had muffed things by tripping on the long stem of one of the lilies and threatening to upset the lane. It made you giggle to remember that.

"Where Thou walkest there springs a lily, Lord of Hosts,"

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was your line. And Genevieve's, except that she had tripped up the lane and muffed it, was: "By the lilies of Good Deeds shall we find Thee, Lord of Hosts."

There was one play of Frank's, Conrad and His Morals. You were secretly glad when the successive office boys brought it out and deposited it with the little bang. The scene where Conrad breaks down Lily's defensive with much juggling of large phrases such as law of selection, greater freedom; biology of love; soul hunger; spiritual fleshpots; live dangerously; and the curtain descends on their entrance into the bedchamber, bored and revolted you.

All of Frank's later plays reminded you somehow of the eyes of the women one saw at the dance palaces. The seeking eyes of the seeking women. The eyes of women seeking to be free that they might be free again to enslave themselves. . . .

Frank's late plays seemed beating about after some kind of freedom. All the talk in them about various emancipations made your neck ache. The seekers. The seekers after the external satisfactions. The satisfactions from the outside in. The men and women in Frank's plays who were bewildered about what they had and about what they wanted. Everything lay outside of themselves and they were putting out frantic feelers. Spiritual bankrupts. Emotional gourmands. Rapacious adolescents. The something in Frank's plays that reminded you of the women's eyes.

Out of the juggle of these phrases, Frank called you a languid adolescent. He had many terms for you. They were mostly out of the stacks of volumes on the shelf over the radiator in his room. The volumes that marked the beginning of certain of his revulsions. Spencer and Darwin and Huxley and Schopenhauer and Wedekind and Kant and Nietzsche, Karl Marx and Kropotkin.

These books, when you could understand them at all, terrified you beyond anything that had ever happened to you.

Terrified you until, after the first delve or two, you would read no further. Sometimes it was almost unbearably disturbing just knowing they were in the house. They gave you a gone feeling that you could never express. As if all the sands in the world were running from under you.

There was another little shelf. Over Frank's bed. "First Principles," Freud and Jung and Ellis and Wassermann. In a vague way, because just glancing through them gave you the feeling of the slipping sands, you hated them. They had taken Frank into a strange alien territory. They had made Frank one day say something about the Max that had been like a stab through you. Sometimes you thought of Frank as drowning in the slipping sands.

Oh, he was clever, all right. You could sit and listen to him talk, pacing up and down his room with his hands plunged into his velveteen pockets, for hours. Sometimes you nodded a little at hearing Frank block out a new play. You could tell when you were bored, first by the back of your neck. It hurt. The men and the women in Frank's plays, groping for the spirit through the flesh.

Nun among the Lilies. There was a way to the spirit through the lilies. But Frank had got away from knowing that.

Frank once said you had a mind that read like a framed sentiment, to hang above an office desk. He told Dudley once, with his arm around you, that Hearts and Flowers was your mind set to music.

It almost took the sting away, Frank's being clever enough to put it that way. You admired that cleverness so. The books in stacks on Frank's table that he read and digested and that only made the back of your neck ache. The plays of Shaw and Sudermann and Strindberg and Yeats and Andreiev and Tchekov. Things that seemed to have a sweet poison to them, like Ulysses by James Joyce. Stories of incredible pain

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by Dostoievski that made you shudder with your pity. H. G. Wells and Synge and Pierre Loti and Gorki and Cabell and Wilde and Masters and Fabre and Shelley and Gibbon and Goethe and Anatole France and Meredith and Hardy and Disraeli and Lawrence and Stevenson and Whitman and O'Neill all mixed up in stacks. There were two volumes constantly on the little reading table beside Frank's bed, so that he could reach for one of them last thing before tweaking out his light. Thus Spake Zarathustra. The passionate cry in that book that smote you and hurt you and terrified you. "Never yet hath there been a Superman." You trembled. You trembled for Frank. You put the book down as if its pages were flame in your hand. . . .

But the second of the volumes on the reading table beside Frank's bed. Penguin Island. There was a book! That was one you liked! The cunning penguins! Why, the penguins were so like people! It made you laugh all through the book. Frank threw back his head and laughed and called you a sweet little simpleton when you drew his attention to your discovery.

Sometimes you did pore a little over Freud and Jung. The parts that reminded you of yourself. Pretty dreams of yours, for instance, that after reading these adventures into human consciousness, could suddenly become disturbing. Not quite nice. At convent you and Mary had pored over dream books. You bought them in little shops where they sold Easter and Birthday cards.

Dream of cats and an unknown lover adores you. Dream of flowers and someone handsome in a foreign country is thinking of you.

There was one more or less frequent dream of yours that you loved. Often in your prayer just before you went to sleep, you asked, kneeling before the Max, for that particular dream. Mary never had it. Sometimes you couldn't remember it next morning, but if you did, it made the day seem gay.

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You were seated beside a fountain. And there were trees and you had torn off a bit of branch and enjoyed sucking the leaves which tasted of lemon. The taste of lemon was strangely sweet and pungent at the same time. Sometimes it actually seemed to you that you awoke with your mouth lined with a eupeptic flavor. Like cool toothpowder. Father was there beside you on the coping of the fountain of the dream. And Victor. But, strangely, only Victor's face, upside down in the basin of ornamental waters. Children came running out of the grove toward you in pitiful droves. Sick children and skinny children and old-looking Magdalenes with gray in their hair and broken front teeth and ravaged faces like the face of Frank's Madelaine in the last act. And to your horror when they came toward the coping, Father raised his cane at them!

Poor Father who didn't want to raise his cane at them. Your pity for him and for them ran down your cheeks in tears. You gathered the children and the Magdalenes around you. The children were hungry and you fed them. The feet of the Magdalenes were bleeding and you washed them. And Father who wanted so terribly not to have raised his cane, kept sitting there with it raised. You were his way of feeding them. . . . Presently, you were off with them among the trees in the sunlight . . . the children who laughed now, and the Magdalenes whose feet you had washed clean . . . you were Father's way of doing what he could not do himself. It made you wake up happy, that dream. The children you had fed and the Magdalenes whose feet you had washed.

The dream book out of the holiday postcard shop partially accounted for that dream.

Dream of children dancing in the woodland and members of your family will be made very happy by your marriage to a handsome blond who will bring not only prosperity to you but to them as well.

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Of course, you knew as well as the next one what nonsense that dream book was. None the less, Dudley was handsome and blond and rich. Dear Fleta and Frank and Mother. The very first week you were married you had already planned out the presents you were to give them. Presents that had not been coaxed or argued or squeezed from Father. Just dear spontaneous presents the way presents should be. There you were! Not only prosperity to you but to them as well.

But in one of Frank's volumes of Freud you could be made wretched about that same dream. Fitful lurking you, deep down inside of yourself about which you knew nothing. Libido. Oedipus complex. Symbolism in the dream. Garden places of your unconsciousness that could become foul with marsh and miasma.

The dream of breaking off a branch in a garden, said Freud, was an expression of a primitive impulse down deep in the marsh of your unconsciousness . . . there was something a little shameful in the rhythmic activity of dancing in a grove . . . it would suddenly seem horrible to dream of fountains. . . .

Frank had a way of teasing you about these forays into his bookshelves.

"Be careful, Laurie, you'll strain your brain."

You were proud of Frank's cleverness. It made you wistful and no little ashamed that the books on his shelves only made the back of your neck ache. And yet to be like Frank made you to chew at the corner of your lips and sneer at mass with a sacrilege that made you pray for him twice as fervently, and write plays that were as restless as the eyes of the women. It took you away from him. There were whole pages in some of the Herbert Spencer that kept you trembling. You were glad "First Principles" made your neck ache. You were glad of the peace that came from faith. You wanted Frank to have less of the torment of doubts and more of the peace. . . .

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There was a little shrine out at St. Vincent's, set in the middle of a small lake where the girls skated in winter and plucked water lilies in summer. It was made out of bowlders and built in the shape of a Gothic arch. Through the small iron gratings there burned a perpetual candle to a stone Mary and Child.

Most of the time your heart could feel like that. A shrine set in the lake of your own inner peace. The peace that the books that gave Frank's lips the worried, chewed look, could not budge.

You wanted some of that peace for Frank. But you would no more have dared to let him know it. Sometimes you burned a candle for him. Always you prayed to the Max for him.

One day, pacing up and down and talking one of his impending plays to you and the northeast leak spot on his ceiling, Frank suddenly began talking to you the kind of personal immediate thing that somehow it was hardest of all to discuss with one's family. With Mary, perhaps. But certainly not with one's brother. No, come to think about it, not even Mary. Not even with one's self.

"You see, Laurie, what I'm trying to do with Blanche. It isn't that the man she marries before my play opens really falls short. It is simply that he falls short of the ideal she has set up for herself. That's why when she gives herself to Rathbun in the second act, it is because she had made a god out of him. She sees in him the man she wants him to be. She isn't the girl to fall in love, so much as she is the girl to fall in love with love. She's a languid adolescent without realizing it. Laurie, aren't you a little bit that way?"

"What — way —"

"Oh, I know you're keen about Dudley and all that, but what I'm trying to get at, Laurie, is the psychology of a woman who finds herself caught in a jam between the spirit and the flesh — a woman who is not highly sexed enough to

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be likely to be swept off her feet and yet — Laurie — now, honestly, is Dud or any other man quite your ultimate idea of the man to whom you want to give yourself? Aren't you compromising? I mean, Laurie — like the woman in my play — isn't it because you are idealizing in one man, all that you hope for in your ultimate man? You're the kind of girl who in her heart doesn't want to give herself to any man except — except ——"

"Except Him, you mean, Frank?"

"Except who? Dudley?"

"No, no. Frank. Only Him."

"Him?"

"Him. Frank, can't you understand? Him! HIM."

You knew that Frank wanted to laugh. You could see it rippling through him and the little run of muscles along his shoulders until finally he burst out and threw back his head and you sat bathed in red flush, wanting to cry and trying to laugh.

"Oh, Lord. Oh, Lord. Oh, Lord. I didn't think they came that way any more. Oh. Oh. Oh. You're immense, Laurie. You ought to be catalogued. You ought to be psychoanalyzed at a public clinic."

You decided to laugh too, even though your eyes were stinging, and in the agony of your embarrassment did the rowdy, nonsense thing of making a flying leap for Frank, so that taken by surprise he stumbled back across the bed aware of what he was in for.

Always it had been your weapon. It was absurd that anyone could be so ticklish as Frank. You had him squirming on the bed and breathless and gasping and begging for mercy. You had him glass-eyed. Even a little hysterical.

"Laurie — Laurie —— Ah! Ah! No! No! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"Sure?"

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"Sorry. Laurie — no — have mercy! That's enough. I'm sorry!"

"How sorry?"

"Very sorry."

But once you released him and he was wary enough to be on guard, off he went peeling into the laughter that doused you in more red flush.

"Oh, Lord. Oh, Lord. I didn't think they came that way any more!"

. . .

Dudley wanted to be married May Day. Why, that was so near! It gave you a little nip at your heart. May! Ten days left in March. April. May! Only forty days! Breathless precious days that in a way you could scarcely wait to have pass and then again could scarcely endure that they should pass.

You laughed up at Dudley when he held you very close and wanted the May wedding, but the nick just the same was in your heart and you begged for June.

And Dudley who wanted May, held out for May until you coaxed for June with kisses, and June it was and somehow the little dread inside you lifted up.

Great big dear Dudley. There was something as loose-jointed and as playful about him as a Newfoundland puppy. He went through life that way. Leaping and licking, in an evanescence of high spirits.

You must have made a strange pair. The cool jonquil slimmness of you. The great shaggy yapping of Dudley. He took your breath away. He made you pliant.

You loved Dudley. And yet how the nicked place in your heart had eased up when he gave in to June. You loved Dudley. But marriage — all girls felt that way. Even Mary had confided tremors beforehand. But that cloud which could

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drift through Dudley's eyes and thicken them — oh, how you wanted just to go on — like this. . . .

. . .

The children were a joy that spring. Except (poor Fleta) when their Mother was about. Then Bennet, who had the strange little replica of his Grandfather's hung-on face, was constantly haggling at his Mother's skirts.

"Mo-other, Bobbie hit me." "Mo-other, my eye hurts." "Mo-other, Bobbie won't play." And even little Bobbie, who was absolutely the color of sunlight, could, when his Mother was about, pucker up as quickly as an April day. Duets of howls were the order of the mornings that Fleta sat in Central Park with the children or if Father let Hilton take them out in the car, their cryings flew in streamers from the window.

Nurses quickly tiring of Fleta at their heels, were constantly coming and leaving the same day.

It was Fleta's way with the children of that perpetual bow under their chins. She could never let them be. Bobbie, don't! You'll crawl a hole in your stockings. Bennet, let brother's blocks alone. Children, why are you just sitting? Go play with your choo-choo cars!

Nervous, harassed children. The lovely mornings of that spring, it was pleasant to leave Mother and Fleta sewing at trousseau trifles for you, and go with them over into the Park.

The rocks ran along at the point you entered, like a pack of dinosaurs, and they were full of coves where you could sit with the children and feel the sun pulling at you as if you were a piece of hard candy being warmly sucked up. And the children ran and fell down terraces and wanted to be picked up so that they might fall down again and Bobbie who was the image of what Fleta's loveliness had been, made flying leaps at your neck and hung there like a clapper and you had to unlock his

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hands and set him down on the new turf, his laughter all jerky, in the adorable way children have.

You felt so full of peace, tending them there. Often you brought a bit of the sheer pink stuff of underthings through which the needle glided with the softest motion.

You liked needlework. Your seams had the delicate meticulous quality of convent-made things.

You had a way too with children, because your hands were tranquil and full of the slowest rhythm.

The years in the convent must have given you that. Although, goodness knows, Mary hadn't it. Or any of the old girls, for that matter, with their nervous-looking, docked heads.

You liked the slow turning upward of your hand. A leisurely lovely gesture that somehow reminded you of service. Mother Agatha had hands like that. Only, of course, hers were the sanctified hands with which one must bear the gift of service to one's Beloved.

One's Beloved. Sister Agatha's Beloved was He. You could feel the red dye of your flush and Frank's laughter rise to that.

Dudley was your beloved. And so was He. In the different way. The difference that lay gleaming in Mother Agatha's face.

You knew, deep down, the why of the nick in your heart.

It was that difference that made you so glad of the thirty-one days from May until June.

. . .

Mary Walsh, who, when she was Mary Kinealy, had lived across the street in the brownstone like your own all through your childhood, before the row had been razed to make way for the apartment house, was glad you were going to be married.

It cemented again an old friendship of neighborhood and

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convent days. It made possible new confidences. More intimate, more mysterious than the old schoolgirl ones had been. They made the old confidences seem so trivial. The days when you had swapped the confidences of confession. The days when you had swapped your convent-girl yearnings and rivalries for first place in the calm affection of Mother Agatha. The little diaries you had kept and bound for only one another's eyes.

At seventeen Mary, who had already been engaged twice, married Jerry Walsh. That had made the difference for a while. There were certain things a married woman . . . Ah, well, it was all back on the old basis with Mary, now that you were engaged. The old Mary, eager with her little adder tongue. The rather terrifying intimate confidences that made you so glad for the additional time from May to June.

Mary had a pink adder of a tongue that could curl when she talked. It could curl and curl. . . .

Often, now that you were engaged to Jerry's business partner, Mary called for you in her toy-looking sedan and took you home to spend the day.

She lived in a gilt cage of an apartment in a building on Park Avenue built along the grandeur of the Taj Mahal. Jerry's name, along with Dudley's, was on the letterhead of the brokerage firm in Wall Street

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The Walshes lived well, spent well and when Mary was nineteen, her baby was eighteen months, but with her bobbed

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hair, slim ankles, little crescent nose with an adorable sprinkling of freckles; slim, uncorseted and her habit of standing with hip protruding, she looked sixteen, and then as a slim boy might look his sixteen.

Mary's axioms concerning men summed up very briefly.

"The more you demand of them, the more they think of you. Keep expensive and you'll keep yourself desirable."

Mary's handsome marquetry dressing table was strewn with emblems of her adherence to her philosophy of married life. Emerald and diamond flexible bracelets. Jeweled sautoirs. Rings. The loveliest little sapphire-encrusted watch about the size of a thumb-nail. Dudley had given you one like it, in pearls.

There was a trained nurse for the baby. A cook. Butler. Two housemaids. And on Mary's second anniversary, one of those long low sedans, all chassis and very little coupé, drove up before the Taj Mahal as a gift. It had not been all surprise. Mary, who was a shrewd and painstaking shopper and knew the secrets of little off-street shops, had really swung the entire matter of the motor car herself. It was a slightly used, eleven-thousand-dollar Italian car, but it only represented an outlay of four thousand for Jerry, not counting simonizing and reupholstery and such new details of fixings as cut-glass flower-holder and automatic cigarette-lighter.

Mary found the car through a newspaper advertisement.

The Walshes could not afford it from the point of view of income and outgo, but they were able to afford it as well and possibly a little better than the average car-owner in their set.

"The more you demand of them, Laurie, the more they think of you. If I didn't keep Jerry's sweet little, pug little, Irish little nose right down to the grindstone, he'd be running around for some other girl with the sense to keep it there. Treat them rough, darling. They love you for it. Start in right with Dud. The boys are young and full of pep and

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they're in right with the Wall Street frat. Make big. Spend big. Come easy. Go easy. The rainy day comes to those who save up for it."

You had first met Dudley at the Walshes'. There was a large photograph, the one you liked best, big old dear Dud, with his easiest charmingest grin, in a Florentine frame on the grand piano in their drawing room.

Dud and Jerry laughed together, sometimes so loudly that the handsome frame rattled. *Sotto voce* jokes with much whackings on backs and nudgings. Sometimes Mary leaned in on them naughtily.

"Never mind, Laurie, you'll be eligible too, when you and Dud are married."

Soon you would be eligible. June.

Quinliven had arrived suddenly from Albany, and he and Father and Fleta and the children were in Father's improvised office which smelled of old pipes and samples of lumber. Fleta was crying terribly. The way her sobs tore through her reminded you of some sort of windlass working up and down. You felt cut with them. You couldn't help, though, wishing that Fleta would not keep wearing that old brown sweater next to her skin. The one through which her figure sagged like cheese through a drip bag. You had made her some sheer and delicate house blouses to wear in its stead, but she wrapped them away in drawers, between tissue paper.

You felt sorry for her in the way that cut you and yet you knew that every time the heave of her tears jellied along under the sweater that Quinliven regarded her with lips that were wry. Your own were a little that way, too.

There sat Quinliven. So square. His face. His head. The plant to his wide-apart knees and the plant to his hands spread out on them. The way his slate-colored hair, with the rain-washed-looking streaks of gray, grew on his head was square.

Like a toupee. Thick and dead-looking and parted down the center so that it grew in a parenthesis off his brow. His mustache was the same shape. Parted in the middle and curving up with a parenthesis.

Odor of palliative unction about him!

With his demeanor and that square look of his, Quinliven had the bearing of a cough-drop manufacturer. The kind who prints his picture on the box.

The actual fact, however, was that he operated the largest long-distance-haul trucking business in the State, to say nothing of certain real-estate holdings in conjunction with his father-in-law. Frank's estimate was that Quin was worth a million. You knew for a fact the enormity of the sum it had cost to send Quin up as assemblyman!

You felt suddenly appalled and frightened by the squareness of Quin. It represented something. Something vast! Something too vast for Fleta, who was sobbing so terribly.

It represented the squareness of Quinliven who was standing on his rights. The hard-earned rights of a man who had stubbornly fought by inches from boiler-making to an income tax that simply would not maneuver to under five figures.

Quinliven, who had worn Fleta down like an old shoe to be cast aside when the shape began to sag.

There he sat. So square. You wanted to hurl yourself between Fleta and that squareness. Beat at it with your fists. Destroy it.

Omnipotence of Quinliven.

The something too vast for Fleta. The something against which you wanted to hurl yourself. Beat with your fists. Destroy. Inviolable sanctity of marriage. What was there of sanctity between Quinliven to whom the loveliness of Fleta was as an old shoe after he had worn it over lopsided and Fleta with the welt across her cheek and across her heart?

"Sacrament of marriage — as the union of Christ with the Church

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is insoluble and cannot be broken, so the bond between husband and wife is indissoluble. . . ."

You knew that of course with your very being. The churchly dictum of the supernatural inviolability of marriage. It was something you had sucked in with your catechism.

Fleta with the look in her blue eyes of having cried them three shades too light and her chin, still round and soft with a poked-in dimple that Frank teased her about, always ready now to tremble.

That was what made you want to hurl yourself against the squareness. Not the insolubility of marriage that you had sucked in with your catechism. Of course . . . marriage *was* a sacrament . . . you accepted without question. . . . That is . . . marriage in general — but Fleta's marriage in particular . . . surely somewhere, somehow, there must be special dispensation for a plight such as Fleta's.

You wanted to tear and to claw for her. Claw the inviolability and all the while you were wishing that she wouldn't sob so, until the under side of her upper arm that hung in a little sac shook like jelly.

It occurred to you fantastically that Fleta was sitting there crying in a cage and that you and Father and Quinliven were sitting there like so many bars enclosing the cage.

And you were such a hurting bar. Every nerve of you and every fiber of you twisting for Fleta crouched there before the squareness of Quinliven.

But just the same you were part of the inexorableness. Inexorableness you had sucked in with your mother's milk. You would no more have questioned it. . . . "*As the union of Christ with the Church cannot be broken, so the bond between husband and wife is indissoluble.*"

You were frightened suddenly of the flame in your heart that had never even spluttered before. You looked at Mother and Father quickly. No, sitting there to the sobbings of Fleta

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they were still part of the inexorableness. Even Mother with her light blue eyes so anguished for Fleta, inexorable there in her pity.

"As the union of Christ with the Church cannot be broken, so the bond between husband and wife is indissoluble. . . ."

"Tell him, Father, that I cannot — go back — not yet, anyway. I have to have time. I have to have time!"

Fleta and Quinliven, with their children playing on the floor between them, never exchanging a direct word. Father squat as a god in his swivel chair, his feet five inches off the floor and his words all cloyed into bunches.

There was something about Father's manner with Quinliven! Had been, all these years of all these occasions with Fleta every so often beating her wings against the inexorability. It was the something in his manner that never had let Fleta come home with any degree of finality.

After the welt, Father had not dared not to let Fleta come home. Yet here it was back again, Father's manner of being guarded with Quin.

"You've not been to her what you should have been, Quin. A man's duty to his wimmin is God's and man's law too. You've not been to her what ye should have."

Not been to her what you should have! Why, Father! Father! That wasn't any more your way! It left Quinliven, whom Father could so witheringly have made little, sitting there squarely and a little insolently with his hands on his knees and looking squarely and insolently back at Father. So squarely that his eyes never blinked and were full of the something that sneered at Father and dared him.

That question fluttering around inside you. The question that more than once, of shame, you had carried to confession, because it fluttered so. The once when you had asked Fleta outright, and your lips had felt scorched.

The buzzings as of insects, all through your little girlhood.

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Horrid Genevieve Lenahan that time at convent coming right out with it. Family in Long Island City. All those years before the stroke, of Father's fishing week-ends, fifty-two weeks a year, and Mother with more of blue washed out of her eyes each time. Frank's lightning flash at the nostrils and the little tendon that turned green when he looked at Father. The flush down Fleta's throat the day you had asked her.

Father sitting squat there among the "good-looking Regans." The name that had clung to the all of you, even after the sap had flowed out of Mother and Fleta had fattened. The good-looking Regans.

Father who looked like a chimpanzee. It made you understand, even while you were blazingly ashamed, that rancorous thing in Father. Wanting to prove over and over again his prowess. With women as well. The curse of that kind of understanding that made you sorry for Father when you should have been scornful. Even if it were true — the part about Long Island City, how your heart flowed over to Father sitting there surrounded by the good-looking Regans, blinking, and his feet five inches off the ground. Shame of feeling tender with Father.

You did though. You couldn't help understanding the rancorous thing in Father, that made him give over the fifty-six thousand to little Bennet, whose legs, like his granddaddy's, bowed out, and whose little head was hung on like a lantern.

You could be sick with pity for Father even while you sat there knowing with your heart that there was something forbade his saying out and out to Quinliven the fair thing to Fleta.

"You've not been to her what ye should, Quin."

Poor Fleta. Poor Fleta. No wonder she was doubled up with crying.

"Look here," said Quin, who clapped each word roughly into his knee with his square-looking 'hand, "the whole

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question as I see it doesn't need going over again. It all resolves itself right down into a nutshell. Will she come home where she belongs, or won't she?"

"No. . . . No. No. I don't belong there! I can't enter that door ever again — after — after — no. No. No."

"Fleta, my poor child!"

"Mother, Mother, don't pity me. I'm not poor unless you send me back there. What does he want with me back there? To torture?"

"In your home, where you belong. As fine a one as money can buy. To sit at my table with my children around it as a man has a right to expect from a woman who took the vows of her Church. That's what I'm asking you and nothing but my rights!"

"Your rights. Father, Father, Father, what rights has he got left? Haven't you anything to say for me, Father? Now! Before him! Father, haven't you?"

"A man must be respecting his wimmin's rights, Quinliven, if he wants her to respect his."

Quinliven sitting there square and looking at Father with the sneer in his eyes.

"Well — we won't discuss that here. Now. Will we?"

Why not, Father? Why not, Father? You cried out with your silence? Why does he dare say that? And Father just sitting. Father just sitting.

"The point is, will she be coming home where she belongs or won't she?"

The pallor of Mother that was almost like a false face cut out of muslin.

"Tell him for me, Father. Tell him, no. No. No. I won't take my children, back into a — a — whore house!"

Fleta!

It was as if someone had struck you across the lips and you tasted the blood.

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Whore house.

That out of the relations of men and women could be minted a word like that. A soiled ugly vicious word . . . yet — yet — Magdalene had been a — a — that — The sisters of the House of Mercy, where you and Mary had more than once delivered letters for Mother Agatha, ministered to — to — them! To whores.

The little lay sister at the House of Mercy who opened the door with two iron keys and then set you down to wait in a stark little anteroom, might have been, somewhere in her past a — a — *that!*

Mary's little adder of a tongue had been so cocksure. Had waved so. "Of course," said Mary, "the little lay sister had once been bad." House of Mercy had redeemed her. You knew that the sisters at House of Mercy had some of them been — been the word that blew off Fleta's twisted lips. It was wrong to feel a little sick at that word. Except with pity.

And yet there you sat and trembled and the room was all full of silence into which something foul had splattered.

Whore. A tainted word from which men and women turned their faces. You too.

He had not turned His face. It came over you in a glow. He had not!

The men and women with the averted, damning faces. Suddenly they were horrible. Your own with the sting across it was horrible. He had walked among them. No word too foul for His pity. The sublimity of His pity.

He had not turned His face or been afraid to know.

You wanted, with a vague yearning in you, to walk out among the men and women who would not hear that word. Who had not tolerance for all the bitter aching words born out of weakness. You wanted to walk out among them and take their averted faces between your hands and turn them to-

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ward the suffering of weakness that they might see and, seeing, be made sublime with the pity that made Him sublime.

Mother Agatha's hands. When you closed your eyes you could see them before you like the wings of doves. You wanted to be like them, with the body and soul of you. Service.

The face of the lay nun who had opened the door with the two iron keys. The wide clear places in the face of the lay nun who helped lift up prostitutes . . . oval clearness. . . .

Your forgot about Fleta for the moment. Poor Fleta who needed your pity. You had it for her. Freely.

As Frank put it, you thought with your tear ducts. That was clever of him and right. You did sometimes cry. Just with pity. Pity for what? It was hard quite to know. Pity — the kind of pity you saw in the drained-looking body that drooped from the Pieta on the parlor table. Pity. The pity you saw in the slow curving hands of Mother Agatha and in the wide clear places in the face of the nun with the two iron keys.

The waving muslin mask of Mother's face.

"Don't, Fleta," she kept crying and dodging back as if she had been hit. "Don't say such things before your children. Before your sister!"

Her sister! Why you wanted to bare yourself to the scorch of the word and let it sear you that you might suffer with your pity as He suffered. If only your mind wouldn't keep veering. Fleta. Fleta. You must keep your mind on Fleta. And Quinliven sitting there with that hateful squareness of his. Father who could have made Quinliven look small and didn't.

"Father," you cried, and reached over for Fleta's hand that was all wet-feeling and slippery with tears, "Father — say it! Say it! Say it! Fleta can't go back to Quin."

"She comes back to me, by God, or she *divorces* me!"

You felt a little light and little queer as if something had been lifted off the top of your head.

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"Or she divorces me ——"

And the squareness was no longer just Quinliven. It was yours and Mother's and Father's. There you all sat. Square. And the something that sat behind you all like a square sphinx on a square block of granite.

No, you said, no. No. No. You said it the way you said things that you had sucked in with your catechisms. Incongruous pictures came blocking into your consciousness as part of the squareness. Father Hearn. Standing with his back to you before the middle of the altar in white lace skirts with his big shoes showing out. The short running steps of the little parish priest from Weehawken who came to the house every so often to collect things that Mother had knitted for his poor. Odor of mass. "Kyrie Eleison. . . . Dominus Vobiscum" . . . the ringing of the bell . . . the Blood of Christ is elevated . . . 25th psalm. . . .

Show me Thy ways, O Lord; teach me Thy paths.

Lead me in Thy truths and teach me; for Thou art the God of my salvation; on Thee do I wait all the day.

"Mother," cried Fleta — "help me!"

Mother who could weep so with Fleta and for Fleta during the long hours of the day that they sat together. Mother whose tears were of the identical salt of Fleta's and whose eyes were bled white from crying, crossing herself again and again and again and suddenly part of the squareness of which you felt yourself a part.

"God forgive him the saying of that, Fleta."

"But, Mother — it's my only way — to be free ——"

"Fleta!"

"Fleta!"

"Fleta!"

Bang. Bang. Bang. Your own bang. Father's. Mother's fluted gasp.

"Well," said Quinliven, and slapped his knee, "there you

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have it! I'm a man and maybe I've gone a little too far for a man's way. I'm not saying I'm not sorry for it. But I am willing to do my part toward righting my wrong. She isn't. There you have it."

"There you *haven't* it!" boomed Father, almost daring to meet Quinliven's eyes — "not unless ye have it over my dead body!"

"But, Father — Father ——"

"I'll see her dead before I'll see a young one of mine — di— di— *that*, by God!"

The terrifying booming of Father's voice. In clumps. It made every object in the room seem rigid with listening.

"It's a fine pass whin a word like that can be spoken in this house. Where there is fear of the Lord. Go wash the dirty mouths of the two of you for saying it. Scrub yourselves clean of it with lye. You're filthy with blasphemy, the two of you. Filthy with blasphemy, ye hear!"

Fleta looking scorched with pallor and her hand weaving the gesture of the cross. Even Quinliven with his lips spread out a little as if stiff.

You felt sick for Fleta. Sick with your very being. And yet inexorable with the squareness.

"Oh, Fleta — sister ——"

Fleta crumpling up was like a hill of beans running down its own sides. You were so heart-sick for her. So heart-sick and so indomitable with the squareness.

"Sister. . . . I didn't mean it, Laurie. Tell them I didn't. Mother of God knows I didn't mean it. Father, forgive. . . . Mother. Bobbie, Bennet — I didn't mean it that way. Not the way of — di-vor — not that way! Mary — Mother of God — forgive ——"

"Come home where you belong then, is all I'm asking," said Quin whose lips were still too splayed-looking to turn in. "No man can do more than be ready to right things."

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"Home where I belong? Where I belong ——" Fleta with that strange wild look across the poor prettiness left her. "Where do I belong? Back there with my children in that house of — of ——"

"No — no — don't be afraid of its horribleness — all of you. I won't say it. But that's what it is. That's what it is! My beautiful home back there in Albany. That's what it is."

"A woman in her senses quits chewing over the past when a man's ready to make a fresh start into the future."

"How many times has he promised that, Father! You know. Quin's trying to save his political skin. Quin doesn't want a scandal with elections four months off. I know him so well — Father — Father — don't — throw me back to the horror of that house he calls home. Don't, Father. Don't!"

Father who had nothing to say. It was incredible. It was like looking at Samson sitting there shorn of his locks. Father who could have made Quinliven so little. Father whose voice on occasion could bolt rage like thunder, sitting there with nothing to say. Shame of it. Pity of it.

"Father — Father ——"

"A woman's place is with her man . . . a man's weaknesses are his sins and his woman's burden ——"

"But, Father — he — he's not — my man. You know that. God knows that too. Then why — then why — if God meant ——"

"Fleta!"

"I didn't mean it, Laurie. Don't look that way! I'm going back — I guess. Of course. The children. Only — only — you — everybody — please — let me stay at home awhile — this month — only until Laurie's married. I — that house back there — that — that — let me stay home awhile ——"

You thought you had never seen a face with everything so mown-down-looking — like a wasteland, all the features seeming razed to the dreary-looking plane surface.

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"Let me stay home awhile? Father? Quin?"

"Who is saying you shouldn't? I'll drive down for you next month in the car. Take your time. All right, girl?"

"Yes — Quin —"

"There, now's a girl!"

The white linen mask of Mother's fluttering. No tears. Not even your own. Quin patting Fleta as he walked out and tousling the heads of the boys. The wraith of Mother moving out through the double folding doors. Father, who would not look, emptying his cold pipe and walking out propped on Victor, his left foot where the stroke had struck, sounding its deadeast.

The graven image of Fleta. Somehow to look at her sitting there with her flabby busts and her drained-out eyes, you felt as if all the rivers in the world had stopped.

An incongruous thought that you could not get free from. The rivers of Fleta's tears were caught. Paralyzed. It was part of the squareness. That terrible sense of immutability of which you were a part.

You were part of the squareness that was crushing Fleta — sacrament of Marriage! You were part of the inexorableness that you had sucked in with your milk. It was in you. Indomitable. *It was you!*

You wanted terribly to kiss your pity against the tear-dragged lips of Fleta, to wind your arms about her pain, to crush it out, and yet what were you, except part of the indomitability that was crushing her.

There could be no divorce for Fleta —

And so without kissing her you went out too, through the halls that seemed suddenly of stone and up the stone stairs and into the stone silence of your room.

Sometimes, when you entered your room at dusk or on dusk-colored days, the Max could seem like a lamp that was burning. You fancied, if the Light had not of course been too pre-

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cious, that you could have read by it or dressed by it or found your way about any darkness by it.

"Beloved," you said, "teach me never, never to doubt Your great wisdom," and went up and laid your head against the edge of the shrine and cried a little wetted place against it.

That made the squareness seem to melt away.

. . .

Father could be so difficult about the car. There never was a time when he let it leave the garage without an argument. Sometimes it stood for weeks, great old-fashioned ark that it was, out of repair and of no good to anyone.

There was something about anyone wanting the use of it that simply went against the grain of Father.

"What's the pint of gadding around town all day stuffing up the traffic whin there's subways? At the rate they're going, the human race will be cursed like snakes, with losing its legs from not using them. Young people with legs have got no business stretching them in limousines."

Well, Mother's legs weren't young. Sometimes they seemed positively to ripple along under her from being tired, but Father could not, would not, be gracious about giving the order for Hilton to climb out of the white coat he wore for oddments and endments of housework and slide into the gray cravenette that transformed him into chauffeur.

And Mother sat so remotely in the car against its leather upholstery. Scarcely seeming to touch it. She in her corner and on the rare occasions when Father would consent, he in his, each looking out of a window.

You hated yourself for ever having to dicker with Father over the use of the old family ark of a car. Most of the time you preferred to use taxicabs or street cars. But occasionally you too were reduced to the dickering.

"Father dear, it's only two weeks until Easter. The pussy

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willows are out and Mother Agatha says I can have all I want if I'll drive out to the convent for them. Father dear, I love the first pussies."

"What's the matter with sending you a lot of it by the truck that drives down iviry day from St. Vincent's to the Cathedral?"

"But, Father, Mother Agatha didn't put it that way. The truck is church property ——"

"Get along, you, I've paid tin times the use of that truck to that convent. There's trouble with the spark plugs, in-yways."

"Hilton says that's all fixed up."

"There's subways running within tin minutes' walk of St. Vincent's."

"I know, Father, but I cannot come straggling home with a subway full of pussy willow."

"Get along . . ."

"But, Father — dear ——"

You knew the way. Obvious tried little ways of wheedle. Yet no one could ever accomplish them with Father except you. That hand of yours about his neck and that little yank of yours at his ear lobe. You could almost feel the runt of his body relax for the grunt that you knew meant yes.

And yet you hated yourself for having to dicker. It made it easier, almost all of the time, to let the car rot into the rust of disuse.

Once when you were much younger and had spent the weekend home from convent, Hilton had driven you back to St. Vincent's in the car because it was raining and you were subject to laryngitis.

Kate had taken her half day off to ride out in the front seat alongside of Hilton.

The country smelled new and black the way dirt does in spring. And every once in a while a whiff of it blew into the

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car on a spurt of rain and made you feel positively as if you were a colt in a meadow with hind legs to kick up.

The rain blew against the windows and smelt through them. You sat on your knees with your palms and your face dug against the plate glass.

Whizzz. Sizzzz. That leap to the feeling of you!

Another car flew by. A black one with a fat doll on the tonneau hood.

Hilton had slowed and looked after and he and Kate had been sly and said horrid laughing things under whispers that you understood without getting it in words.

You had not seen clearly, but that must have been a car bearing a pennant from Long Island City.

The buzzings. You knew from the buzzings. The buzzings of Kate and Hilton. The buzzings you had heard about you for years. . . .

There had been a glimpse of a large woman in that car with a spray of yellow curls on her forehead, and some children, much smaller than you, in pink plush hoods and more sprays of sewed-in-looking yellow curls. The buzzings. That was supposed to be Father's car, too. And those children in the pink plush hoods with the fringes of sewed-in yellow curls were — were —

You felt a little squeamish. The way you did when you rode backward in the street car.

The leap had gone out of you.

Hilton and Kate there whispering and laughing the horrid things from the front seat.

The buzzings. The buzzings. Your childhood had been full of them.

Oh, but the joy of motoring with Dudley!

The shining red roadster and the low streamline and the smart fawn upholstery and the ridiculous windshield that

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looked like goggles for a dinosaur. And Dudley tucking you in and the engine singing and roaring under you and sometimes as you sped, everything lost its outline and trees and farm and fences and rails became a ball of twine winding you surely and deliciously into the center.

You and Dudley. Tighter and snugger into the center. That feeling of you and Dudley being wound into the center. The center of — well, that was the glory of it — the center of — the center of your being! That was the way you felt when under the warmth of the shag of fur rug, the great length of Dudley was warm against the length of you. Dudley who could go wild with the taste of speed, baring his square white teeth to the wind and wrapping and wrapping the ball of the universe about the two of you until outlines faded and there were you and Dudley in the very heartbeat center. . . .

It made the thirty-one additional days from May until June seem suddenly less precious, feeling the length of Dudley there and his engine wild under you and the wind in your ears and Dudley with his teeth bared. . . .

It was so hard ever to be quite sure enough. Sometimes the flesh sang so. Dudley scooping you up with one arm and with the other boldly guiding the wheel. It seemed to make of you a little electric bell, ringing. Being scooped that way. And then again, inexplicably, that rilling, gone feeling. Like sands running out of your fingertips. The dead feeling toward Dudley that could come out all over you. Those were the times that the thirty-one days could seem so precious. So as if you could never bear to have them pass.

Sometimes you dreamed of Dudley and the mash of his kisses against your eyes. Sometimes you dreamed of the slow white hands of Mother Agatha. The hands that all through your childhood you had seen arranging lilies in vases at Easter and buttoning up the reefers of little girls with running noses.

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Being beautiful was something that kept a little whir of excitement going through you.

Sometimes on the rides that spring, Dudley would draw up suddenly in a wood or beside a lake and swing you out bodily by the arms.

"There! Stand up, Beautiful, so I can look at you. I haven't clapped eyes on you for fifteen minutes."

Purr, purr, was how you felt with all the contour of you. Being loved by Dudley gave you a flush that you could feel against your cheeks in two mats of pink warmth.

"Laura, you're beautiful!"

You were wearing a blue cloth suit that spring without sleeves, so that the sleeves of your white silk blouse came through and there was a blue flowing tie and a blue felt little cloche hat that flared.

You did all your shopping at the one department store where Father kept a charge account for his women. It was a first-rate shop but staid, and distinguished for one of the largest mourning departments in town. There were such gay lovely things in the less conservative shop windows. Father never demurred at your bill. But sometimes you wanted money in your purse — to go where you would. None of the Regan women ever had money in their purses.

The blue outfit had come from the same old shop, but you knew that the suit and the tie and the hat and your eyes and the sky of that spring were one and the same color.

You could feel Dudley grilled with that blueness. Mostly the blueness of your eyes.

"Oh, Dudley, Dudley, I love being beautiful for you."

It was spring and there was a beat in your throat and once you caught him by the two hands and twirled around on the turf until your skirt flew out in a stiff sail and your hat fell back and Dudley who was as big and as playful as a bear, caught and kissed you down so tightly against the eyes that

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your darkness was all spangled and you — your very own self, were one of the spangles!

That spring was like one of the cocktails you had sometimes at the restaurants. Only cooler and sweeter. But it made you laugh almost as easily. You were just glad with being. . . .

"I wish, Dud, we needn't ever have to move from being right here beside this lake — just us — this way ——"

The clouds through Dudley's eyes. Like the thick white low ones that travel fast.

"Laurie, no! I'm tired of just this way. A long engagement is too hard on a fellow. You don't understand. If I were a he-man, the sheik kind that comes along in novels, I'd never have given in to that extra month. Laurie, let's not wait!"

"Why, Dud, isn't it just perfect — this way — now ——"

"Don't say that, Laurie, you frighten me."

"Me frighten you?"

"Yes, because perfect in its way, as it is now, it isn't the kind of ultimate perfection I want with you, Laurie. Great Scott, it's all right now — a little while — but, Laurie, a man's only a man!"

"You mean you're bored, Dudley, being engaged?"

"Good heavens, no. No. Not bored. I — honestly, Laurie, you're such a baby! If I didn't know you, I'd think you were spoofing me. Honestly, dear! You're such a baby. I wouldn't have you different — but, sweetheart, they just don't come like you any more! They're wise, nowadays. You're a funny one. You roll your stocking and drink a near cocktail and, by Jove, if you don't come out and say things that sound as if you think little pigs grow on ham trees and that Santa Claus slides down chimneys. Girl alive, Laurie, a man's a man!"

"Why, yes — Dudley — of course ——"

"You say that as if it didn't mean a confounded thing to you."

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"Why, yes — Dudley ——"

"Well, then, Laurie, the plain fact is — this *isn't* perfect to me, Laurie — don't you see? — it's because I love you that it isn't perfect. I love you, and I want you to love me back the same way. I don't want this to be perfect yet for you, any more than it is for me. Laurie, don't you understand?"

"I do. I do. Only ——"

"Only what?"

"Dud, what if I am not that kind of a person?"

"What kind?"

"Oh, you know. The kind they talk about in Frank's books on psychoanalysis ——"

"Nonsense. Don't you get tangled up in any of this quack analysis stuff. You're *my* kind of a person, whatever kind it is you are!"

"Am I, Dud? Sure?"

"I love you down into the very center of those blue and darling eyes of yours."

You knew in a way what Dudley meant. It made you feel a little surer. It was the feeling of being wound into the center of the ball . . . and the ball was your very own being. . . .

"And I love you — Dud."

"Don't mind my kissing you so hard, Laurie. Christ, Sweetheart, a man's a man. I'm sorry. I'm sorry! It slipped out."

"*Christ!*" Every time Dudley used it that way, it was as if he had taken your heart and held it back a beat. It made you jump and cross yourself and something deep down inside of you, turn.

"I'm sorry, Sweetheart. I'll go to high mass with you Sunday for that. I never mean it in the rotten way it sounds, darling. It's something I picked up at the front."

"You mustn't, Dudley. That name. In vain."

"I know it, Laurie. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry."

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Each sorry in a mash against your eyes.

You were caught up in Dudley's arms, there in the thicket of green beside the springtime lake, head back for his kisses until you could feel the strain at your waistline.

Christ. The drooping body of the Pieta. The drained beautiful body. . . .

If only Dudley needed the kind of love you could sometimes feel your heart breaking with. The love of pity. The pity that made you cry. The pity that made the poignant droop of the Body feel like a stab through you. Just pity.

If only Dudley needed you that way. Not the way of the hot mash of kisses against your eyes.

But the way of the Pieta on the parlor table.

Curious how spring crept into the concrete slit of Eighty-second Street. There was not a scrap of green to be seen and the little patches before the houses that might have been turf, were asphalt. But there was a rill of life along the street.

The squirm of spring. You smelled it. You threw open windows to it. You washed your hair and dried it on the roof to it.

The sun beating down on your hair! You were beaten gold! You could feel the gold of you flame like a pin wheel into a disk. The golden disk of you!

Bennet and Bobbie ran slashing through the pebble floor of the roof. The sun beat and beat on you and the disk began to whirl! The leaping rays of gold, as you flung your drying hair. It made you feel a little crazy and a little pagan and drenched.

With life! You flung your hair and the life ran out to the tips of it and made it stand out stiffly and whirl in the pin wheel of gold. Of gold. The gold of you!

Under the blue of your kimono, you sang. The white singing flesh. It was as full of life as the disk. The roaring whirl-

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ing disk that was like a sun, flung molten off the white universe of your flesh.

Spring, humming through the asphalt of Eighty-second Street and you on the roof a little crazy with it, a little pagan with it, a little drenched with it.

You were all in the whirl of gold and you ran after Bobbie and splashed up pebbles with him and kissed him against the throat until he kicked with his funny chubby feet into your thighs and Bennet wanted to play sail-the-ship and you crossed hands with him and whirled and the gold got so big and the disk got you dizzy and finally you landed in a tussle of the singing flesh and the flaming disk and Bennet and Bobbie, all of you there in a heap, short of breath and gold. . . .

You thought of Dudley, who was so alive. You reeled with the gold of yourself, and if he had been there you — you — suddenly, so that you put little Bobbie down as if ashamed for him, the feel of the mash of Dudley's kisses was against your eyelids and you closed them with the ecstasy. And for an instant, there in the springtime on the roof with your hair drying to the breeze, it was as if, for the merest, the merest instant, you had peered into the mystery of why the thirty-one days longer were not precious for Dudley.

Stella Genesee typed Frank's manuscripts for him. She was a nervous wisp of a pretty girl with gray eyes made superbly intense by black lashes, and a rather medieval-looking head draped in straight bangs and a fall of Indian-black, docked hair that hung like wings. There was something direct and swift about Stella Genesee. She walked on her low heels so noiselessly and so with destination.

She was a stenographer at the Yards and every day, and sometimes twice, she arrived at the house with papers for Father, and to take his dictation, which she did glibly, breaking up the word clumps with surprising ease.

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Once, as you were coming downstairs you saw her standing in the hall beside the rack where one of Frank's topcoats hung, holding the sleeve of it jammed up against her cheek. Of course she dropped it and pretended to be putting with the strap of her brief-case and the black hair fell forward like blinkers and shut in her face.

But something in the eyes of Stella Genesee, for the instant that you had seen her there with Frank's old topcoat jammed against her sleeve, made you realize with a little thump of terror the something you had not to give.

The eyes of Fleta when she had first loved Quin, had been a little like Stella Genesee's.

Your own, you seemed somehow to know, were more like the eyes of Mother Agatha when she walked among her poor.

The wounded eyes that love most what they pity.

Fleta was so tender with you. It would have been easier if only she had submitted to the inexorableness less meekly. The terrible meekness of Fleta. It hurt you almost more than you could bear, to see her crying sometimes over the children as they lay asleep and then with the red rings under her eyes almost turned purple from the weeping, plan in the next breath for that return to Quin. Some household oddments to be shopped in New York and taken back to Albany. A set of iron garden furniture with striped yellow and white awnings, and some Dutch hearth tiles that kept Fleta fluttering in and out of shops.

Ironically enough, although it had not occurred to you that way until Frank shrugged his shoulders on a dreary little laugh about it, one day when Fleta was late to dinner because she had been delayed shopping the Dutch hearth tiles. There were a few broken ones in the house at Albany and Fleta wanted to match them up. It took Frank to see it and say it.

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Fleta, whose hearth fires had long since been ashes, puttering about over hearth tiles!

It made you so sorry for her that you would have preferred her to turn on you as part of the terribleness. The inexorable-ness. You were part of the gargantuan obeisance to a sacrament that was sending Fleta back to Quin.

And yet here was Fleta who cried in her sleep, somehow full of tenderness for you. Almost full of fear.

You wanted the old basis with her. The half motherly scolding basis. Fleta had always been like that with you. A little fussy. A little like Mother used to be. Sometimes you could remember quite well, as Mother began to dim more and more and sit hours sometimes with her hands just folded in the quiescence of submission, it had been Fleta, those years before her marriage who ran the house, and ran you too, with a high, housewifely hand, while Mother sat getting dimmer. . . .

And now suddenly in place of the old Fleta with the high hand was this tender Fleta who seemed afraid for you. You knew! It was because you were engaged. Fleta who wanted so terribly that all that was wrong for her should be right with you. It made her afraid for you. And tender. So ineffably tender. And then there was that new and concerned something in the way Mother pattered about you. Something new about Father, who liked Dudley, yet seemed to grudge him that liking.

Fleta, being tender, when all the time you knew it was Fleta being afraid for you. And you being a little afraid for yourself when you could not always feel back the fierceness that Dudley kissed against your eyelids.

Dudley, though, knew a little secret! The secret of the highballs. They tickled you so! They made you feel full of the roaring of surf! They made you so full of laughter and so full of the power to relax. Two of the little glassfuls could achieve that. You never took more than two. Dudley carried

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the silver flask in his hip pocket. He knew just the amber rightness for you. Not more than half an inch of the amber clouding up the long spurt of the seltzer. Dudley would have been the last to let the amber get too deep. Sometimes Jerry, when you went out dancing in the group of four, wanted to mix your highball to a deep brown, the color of Mary's.

But Dudley would not have that. He himself mixed yours, to just the very right degree of light amber. Just enough to make it easy to laugh. You liked Dudley's air of proprietorship over just the certain amber to your highball. Paler than his or Mary's or Jerry's. His proprietorship of you gave you a thrill. Dear Dudley!

But once at Mary's, after an evening at a musical comedy, you had really got a little tipsy. That was Jerry's joke, slipping twice too much scotch whisky into everyone's highball without anyone knowing. You could see, by glancing down along your nose, the flush on your cheeks. It made you feel warm and merry as a bonfire.

"Attababy!" was Jerry's chief contribution to the occasion. "Attababy!" his every other word. He mixed one after another of the highballs in a long expert stream from one tumbler to another and shouted attababy. He tilted back Mary's head and mumbled kisses along the arch of her neck and mumbled, and the mumble was attababy. "Attababy!" cried Jerry, and wrapped himself around in a white silk Spanish throw from off the grand piano.

You kept laughing and laughing. You didn't want to laugh and you put up your hand to your mouth to keep it straight. But it wouldn't hold straight. Jerry was so funny, pretending to climb a rope, like a sailor slithering up toward mast.

"Attababy!"

Oh. Oh. Oh. You bit your lips to keep the laugh down. It was too silly not to be able to stop laughing. You tried to think of doleful things to douse your merriment. What

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was there that was doleful? Fancy not being able to think up one single thing to feel doleful about — Oh, yes —

Once, long ago, a puppy had been run over in front of a grocery on Columbus Avenue. It had writhed like an animated little snail and women had cried out and turned their heads. It had hurt you so. That agonized knot of puppy.

The pity of it had hurt exactly the way to love gave you pleasure. Only no love had ever been so poignant as your pity could be. Even for the puppy. Because there was no policeman, and no one quite dared, you had gone out into the street and lifted the little thing to your lap and got your coat bloody and yourself bitten in the thumb because you moved his pain —

Finally a policeman came and you had run down Eighty-second Street away from the shot, which had followed you, though, and even now could bang out little echoes in your brain.

You tried to think of the puppy to keep your mouth straight and of Father the day they had brought him home with his two hands clumps, from the stroke, and of Mother sitting and getting dimmer and of the little lay sister with the two iron keys and even of the drained-looking Body. . . .

But it was no use. The laughter kept blowing in gusts off your lips.

Oh, Dudley! Dudley! Was there ever, after all, such a dear as Dudley? Scooping you up. Making you feel full of beauty, the way he loved you for your vase-like contour and the two pink bonfires you could feel under your eyes and the way your lips, when his came down against yours, mashed up with the faint fragrant crush of strawberries. It was silly to pretend not to know that when Dudley breathed hard when he kissed you and could never seem to leave off seeking with his lips that little cove deep down in the whiteness of your neck, that it was because your beauty made him a little mad.

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The purring beauty. It gave you the familiar sense of being a great lovely cat, but the too much rye in the highball made your eyes feel green and you were lazy with being lovely, the way you were when you stretched out in bed mornings before the cheval mirror and watched your flesh shining.

There was a little rash out all over you at the thrill of Dudley's imminence and every time that Jerry shouted "Attababy!" and mumbled the kisses along Mary's arm, Dudley kissed you too, against the eyes, and you were glad that the too much rye in the highballs made you want to be loved the way that being engaged to be married should make you want to be loved.

You wanted so terribly to feel even some of the things that made Mary's little pink adder of a tongue seem to race around her lips in the telling, and the things that, all during the time she was engaged, had made Fleta's eyes to shine.

And here you were now, tingling with them. Your body-beauty shining. Warmly. The beauty that Dudley breathed on so hard when he kissed, was the beauty of fire. The fire of the passion of man for woman.

"Attababy!" cried Jerry, and flung the long fizz of a highball from tumbler to tumbler.

"Attababy!" you cried back with the laughter that was blowing in gusts off your lips.

The spring kept crawling forward. Bennet cried and said his legs hurt him and Fleta dosed him up with tonics. The petty shops on Columbus Avenue began to bloom with fresh rhubarb and the season's first berries and little boxes of transplanted pansies, sod and all, that died, looking up at you.

Almost all year round you kept a little glass of pansies, with their heads leaning slightly over the rim, in a small red glass dish before the shrine.

At convent in spring, there had always been a red glass

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dish of pansies before the shrine in the center of the round of lake. Sometimes Mother Agatha had permitted you to row out and place it there.

The ritual of the pansies was one that you did with the top of your brain. One of those habits that you performed automatically.

Sometimes, it must be admitted, you went to mass that way. Or said a row of Holy Marys almost with the edge of yourself. Once you had seen a girl on her knees in the pew in front of you surreptitiously draw out a little sample of blue fringe and hold it appraisingly against a bit of blue velvet.

It made you ashamed, but often in the hurly and burly of that spring you rushed to mass that way. With the edge of yourself.

But inexorably spring was crawling forward. And twice you and Mother and Fleta had gone for fittings in the ark of the family car.

One day it was finished. Your wedding dress! In its straightness it was almost like the chemise slip of a doll, but there was a tinge over the satin. A little of amber as if from the reflection of your hair. But it was the patina of years. It was the same satin that Mother had worn. And Fleta. Some of their young goldness must have lain over it too. It had a little shimmer and a little hiss when it slid over your head and a little hug to your breasts where it was looped in with pearl trimming and a knot of the loveliest rose point.

You stood in Madam Boué's fitting room before the pier glass, with your arms half away from you like the bisque doll's, and two apprentices, with their mouths full of pins down around the hem and Mother and Fleta who had once worn the satin, sitting there in black, in chairs against the wall, with their beauty all run out of them and looking at you so. Looking at you so!

"A little to the right, please. A little to the left, please. Raise your arms, please. Snip! Baste! There. So. Turn, please."

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The sun came in on your hair and Madam Boué with her mouthful of pins could not seem to stop telling you that you were beautiful.

"*Charmante! Exquise! Ravissante!*" And you turned and you turned, slowly, like the doll, for the pinnings, and Mother and Fleta whose young sheen was still on the satin, sat there in their blacks. . . .

"You are, *Mademoiselle*, zee most beautiful bride seence I am in America and all zee most beautiful brides have come to me — a little bit higher on this side, Nettie! *Mon Dieu*, such arms! Eet is like, *Mademoiselle*, you are carved out of marble. . . ."

The eyes of Mother and Fleta, seeing you through two layers of tears. Your own and theirs.

A little to the right. A little to the left. Raise your arm. Snip. . . . Baste. There. So! Turn now, please.

And still you were not a bride. You were like nothing so much as the *bisque* doll in the chemise slip.

"Laurie," said Fleta, moistening her lips, "you are perfectly beautiful."

"You look sweet, daughter," said Mother, whose hands, in black silk, were laid in her lap over her black hand-bag and whose small black turban had a beaded *aigrette* that quivered.

You knew it. Your head felt so little and so gold-colored and your body lovely where the pearl trimming came up softly under the swell of your breasts the way it did in pictures of Empress Josephine or Queen Louise's. And your hips flickering through the satin and the little lift to one of them the way you had time and time again admired that little lift in the *Venus de Milo*. Only you were so much smaller and it gave you the grace of standing that way to gird up your Greek draperies. Of course they weren't Greek. Your dress was as straight as a little sheaf. But the way your lifted hip

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shone through. You liked it. But still you were not a bride. You were just a doll in a chemise. . . .

And then. It reminded you of the lovely descent of doves to a circle of crumbs in the park. Flutter of wings. The little tip-tilt to the white underside of wings. The veil came down over you like that and bound you at the brow with blossoms and another ruffle of the rose point descended almost over your eyes and there suddenly, in Madam Boué's fitting room before the pier glass, you were a bride!

You. Laura Regan. The bride.

"Mother!" you cried, and ran toward her and wanted to crumple up at her feet. "Fleta!" But they would not let you. The dress. The dress of the bride. "*Mademoiselle* — careful — the veil —"

Of course. Of course. Madame was right. You wanted to be careful of the veil. You were a bride and you wanted to remain one. An immaculate one. Mother Agatha was that kind of a bride. And the lay nun with the two iron keys. A — perpetual bride.

No — no, not that of course! To be the bride of Dudley and want to want to feel the hot mash of his kisses was not to be a perpetual bride. Mother and Fleta were against the wall, in black. They had not been perpetual brides. You would not be — except — to be so white — rinsed in light as you were when you looked in the mirror — at yourself in the veil —

"Mother. Fleta," you cried, and ran toward them again with that fear. The fear that the highballs could so quickly dissolve. "Mother?"

"Laurie — your veil — you'll muss it!"

Of course. More than anything, you didn't want to muss up being a bride. You wanted to stay just so. Immaculate. Perpetually.

You. Laura Regan. The bride.

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There was something about the face of Stella Genesee that snagged your attention each time you saw her. She was a swift little thing. Always hurrying back and forth on errands from the Yards for Father, the bulk of a brief-case hugged up under one arm and her eyes seeming to look squarely at her destination.

You remembered that most about Stella Genesee. She had destination. That, and the something about her face. The whiteness of her cheeks jutting out beneath the boldness of bangs. The wide spaces between her eyes. There was that about the face of Stella Genesee that sometimes, apropos of nothing, could rise and tug at you. She had kissed the sleeve of Frank's topcoat that day in the hall. You could have vouched for it. And the wide space between her eyes was like a tragic bleached little desert. The tragic look to the wide areas of Stella Genesee's face.

Once or twice when you met her in the hall or coming out of Father's rigged-up office, or depositing a batch of manuscript for Frank in the under part of the hatrack where rubbers and galoshes were stored, you wanted to stop and talk. Stella was such a swift little thing and always in her nervous hurry. You wanted to put out your slow hands on her with a gesture of the ready pity in your heart.

But Stella with her brief nod and her way of seeming intent on destination, was too quick for you. And you let it go at that. With just "Good morning, Miss Genesee." Or: "Father is just finishing his luncheon." Or: "Won't you sit down while you're waiting, Miss Genesee?"

There was never anything more to say. And yet the face of Stella Genesee. Sometimes at night when you awoke suddenly, it was to catch yourself in the very gesture of reaching out the slow hands of pity toward her. . . .

It was two years since old Father Bruno had died. You had cried bitterly. Dear Father Bruno who had made it so easy to

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confess. You seldom went any more. The strangeness of talking through the curtain to strange ears. There had been something dear to the very nap of the curtain with Father Bruno behind it.

But now there was your new father confessor. Father Hearn. You had picked his name off the brass plate. You liked his voice. It was young and had a boom in it. Not the old sweet treacle of Father Bruno's. You had loved that too, for the quieting it did to you.

But now there was something strange and new and adult to confession. It made the little girl years through the curtain to Father Bruno seem so remote and childish. The little concrete confessions of little lies and little vanities and little hurts. . . .

It had once been as much a part of your routine as lacing your boots each day and poking in the strings to keep them from dangling.

But now: You were grateful for the boom in Father Hearn's voice, because it made him seem strong enough to understand somehow what dear Father Bruno would only have clucked and intoned over.

And yet when you came, usually on First Thursdays, and sank into the little pool of you outside the curtain and let your heart well up until it flowed out on your tears, you knew that Father Hearn was not understanding, quite.

The boom in his voice was so like the rhythm of ritual and the turmoil in you had neither rhythm nor category.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

"The Lord be with you. And with thy spirit!"

"I confess to Almighty God, to Blessed Mary, ever Virgin, to Blessed Michael the Archangel, to Blessed John the Baptist, to the holy Apostle Peter, to all the saints, and to you, my spiritual Father, that I have sinned exceedingly in thought, word and deed, through fault, through my most grievous fault. . . ."

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"Be calm, my child. Cleanse your spirit in the holy waters of confession. Be calm and pray for some of His strength."

"I do, Father. I need it so. Strength. Charity. Father, I want peace so. I am so full of turmoil. It — it is hard to find the words, Father — for such confession — I ——"

"O Lord, hear my prayer and let my cry come unto Thee."

"Where — where shall — can — I begin ——"

"With thy conscience, my child. And with thy spirit."

Oh. Oh. Oh. The rhythm of the words, when there was a storm in you that made your heartbeats feel like great tree branches twisting. The rhythm of the little words. . . .

"Father — Father — help me. Father — have there been others like me? It seems to me there never could have been other girls — in just my kind of turmoil."

"May the Lord be to thee, my child, a helper and protector. Tell all, He will hear and condone all. . . ."

"Father, is it wrong to be engaged like me, to be married — in eighteen more days, Father — eighteen — only eighteen — and I, you see, Father, I do love him. He's good. All of us know that. I know it. My family. But — Father — Father, how shall I get it said ——"

"Be not afraid, child. The Lord thy God is thy Savior and only His wisdom is past understanding. . . ."

The little words. The little words. Hoisted up there on that boom of a voice. The little rhythm, when your heart was a forest storm. You wanted to crash through the curtain of the confessional and find there literally and bleeding the Heart into which you could crawl.

"Father, I love my fiancé, but is it wrong — not to want to marry — him — ever — but to just stay engaged? Always, I — you see, there must be girls like that, like me. Foolish girls — not knowing. But it makes it so hard; the not knowing. The dreading the passing of the eighteen days. I do love my fiancé, Father. Only most of the time — I only love him

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the identical way I love my Father, and the way I love Mother Agatha, and the way I love you — and the way I love Him. Is that wrong, Father?"

"There is the love of the spirit, daughter, and the love of the flesh. Both of them holy, when sanctified by the grace of our Savior."

"But, Father, it is not so simple as just that. In the beginning — a girl should want to marry the man she is in love with. The love of — of sex should be different — shouldn't it, Father? She should love him — that — that sex way — shouldn't she, Father?"

"My child ——"

"But I don't, Father. I'm in love with him — the way I should be — sometimes, I think, but generally, Father — I don't feel the way a girl should who has to — who is going to — marry. You see, Father. I never want it any different between us — between Dudley and me — than it is now. Father, do you understand? I want to stay a — a perpetual bride. Like Mother Agatha out at St. Vincent's. I never want to be any different than now. Just engaged. Not married, Father. Ever. It's not in me to be married that way. Like my mother. Like my sister. How wicked am I, Father — feeling this way all — the time I'm engaged to be married — why can't it be beautiful to me the way it should be — is it because I'm just made that way — Father — help me ——"

"Why, daughter, once you have looked deeply into your soul and found that the love you bear this young man is the holy love sanctified by the Church, once you are sure, all your misgivings are only the misgivings of a pure young girl about to embark upon a new and sacred experience. Child, pray to your Savior to lead you . . ."

"But, Father . . ."

"Say your Beatitudes, my child, and remember, blessed are the clean of heart; for they shall see God."

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"But, Father ——"

"He said therefore to them again: Peace be with you."

"But, Father, if you could help me just to understand ——"

"Our Lord made matrimony a sacrament and put definite injunction that those who enter into wedlock should become one in body and in soul . . . in a union as complete as Christ with His Church."

The beating rhythm of the words. Words. You carried them, mostly rhythm, out to kneel before Mary in her shrine before a station where a blue and ruby light poured in through a window of the Transfiguration.

The beating — the beating of the rhythm of the words. . . . Words.

"Mary, Mother of God — *you* help me ——"

Words. You carried them, mostly their rhythm, home to kneel before the Max ——

"Beloved — You — *YOU* help me ——"

One afternoon, hurrying home along Eighty-second Street from having inspected a cote of an apartment on East Fiftieth Street, that was almost identical with Mary's and only one block removed, this happened; a furtive thing that revolted you at first and then was to flood you with pity.

Frank was standing on the side flank of what had once been Dolge's saloon on the corner of Columbus Avenue but had since been converted into a sort of delicatessen-lunchroom. He had on a cap with the visor well down over his eyes and the collar to his tan spring coat was turned up. Frank often wore a cap to the Yards, but to-day that cap — and the turned-up collar — seemed part of the furtiveness. Frank standing there alongside Dolge's old corner with the spring sunshine drenching around him, but scarcely seeming to penetrate the little area created by his gray-green pallor. Almost the glitter of Frank's pallor.

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And you knew, somehow, with the tiny waving antennæ of your intuition, knew even before you saw her huddled up there against the wall with her handkerchief against her mouth, that Frank was talking to Stella Genesee.

Sure enough. There she was with her brief-case under one arm and with her handkerchief against her mouth holding back sobs that made her jerk.

You felt ashamed in an angry sort of way. Frank, standing there on the street corner so near his home, in all the vulgar clatter of the elevated railroad and the bang of traffic and the raw stares of passers, grinding out low intense words between lips that remained practically closed and Stella Genesee with the tears running down into the handkerchief which she kept jammed against her mouth.

Shame. And then you saw Stella's eyes. The look in the eyes of Stella Genesee! It was like plunging into a lake that was made of the saltiness of the tears of generations of women in Stella Genesee's kind of terror.

You knew as you went down into the drown of her eyes, knew with your own terror for her, just what was Stella's kind of terror and your hands with the slow curve to them were at their old ridiculous itch of wanting to reach out. To lift up. To reach out to Stella Genesee standing there crying on the corner of Columbus Avenue with her handkerchief pressed to her twisted mouth, and her eyes in which you were drowning, fixed on your brother Frank, whose cap visor was pulled down over his eyes in the furtive fashion.

"Frank!"

"Go on home," said Frank to you in the manner again of his being a youngster and you hovering on the outskirts of one of his street-corner confabs with Ashfurth Ropps.

You could no more have budged from standing there staring into the darkness of Stella's eyes.

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You! — they seemed to cry out — You! They seemed to cry out — You help me!

The slow white fingers of Mother Agatha. The sweet hands. They seemed fastened to your wrists. Captive doves.

"Frank?"

"Go home, Laurie. I'll be along presently." The way Frank planted himself between you and Stella Genesee; he all but cut her off from view except that, over his shoulder, her brown eyes were looking at you. Two dark bruises of eyes. You just stood looking back. . . .

"Miss Genesee?"

"Do you hear, Laurie? Go home."

"Oh, Frank, let her stay. She may help. Somehow."

Frank suddenly gripping your hand harder than he knew because you could have screamed with the pain.

"Laurie, there is nothing that we're ashamed of. Not even before a child like you. It's a situation you probably won't understand. But you may — feel it. It's all so damn difficult. We're in a jam. Don't exactly know where to turn first. That about sums it up, doesn't it, Stella?"

Stella Genesee trying not to cry, but the terror swimming up so in her eyes.

"Yes, Frank. But not here, please. Let us walk. Anywhere. The park."

You found yourself sidling over toward Stella, and her fingers, when they found your seeking hand, bit frantically, into your palms.

For days there remained in them the agonized half-moon bites of Stella Genesee's finger nails.

There was something gay in the way the late-afternoon springtime hung over the park. The trees with the leaves on them scarcely more than pricks. Unbelievable luster of new green. The mash of grass under your feet. It gave away under

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you like flesh. As if you were walking on a great grand bosom. Poor Stella, she kept running ahead a little, half frantic for destination.

Finally you were on your own shoulder of rock where delicate forsythia stood about as if spreading yellow skirts to enclose you. The same rock where you and Bobbie and Bennet had watched so many of the slow mornings of that lovely spring grow into noon. The precious mornings that somehow could not be slow enough.

There were only fifteen of them left. You knew them as you knew the beads of your rosary. Each one a preciousness.

Poor Stella, you were saying with your heart, and yet there was a streak of scare through you, so that when you sat down on the rock beside her and faced Frank, who was already talking, you held yourself very straight not to show you were trembling.

It was not as if you were surprised. Strangely, so strangely, it was as if you were hearing something that had been told and retold you so often that you knew it with your tears and your compassion and your hands that were so full of pity.

You held them, though, very frigidly in your lap. You felt as if little rills of sand were running down off your body. Little chills of sand.

This then was life in the ugly. The raw naked thing that the girls at convent used to snicker over in the locker rooms. This then was the thing that had once happened to Thea, a housemaid, the night she left crying. Happening to you now so closely that you could have reached out and wetted your fingers of Stella's tears.

Frank whose every quiver when his face became the gray-green under Father's tyranny of jeers and Mother's tyranny of tears, had been your quiver. Your very own brother now, with his poet's face and sensitive nostrils, caught here in the kind of thing that one read about in sensational newspapers

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or overheard in locker rooms, or caused servant-girls to be sent away, bag and baggage, at dead hours of the night.

Frank and Stella whose passions had leaped out of bounds. The bounds that were as clearly defined as the rope around a boxing ring. There they were. Out of bounds! The way people in newspaper headlines were.

You should have been revolted. And were in the way of the sickish feeling of the little running chills of sand. Except for the eyes of Stella Genesee. It was as if they were bruises that in turn left bruises upon whatever they gazed. You could feel yourself black and blue with them. Stella Genesee's bruises of eyes, bruising you.

You were glad Frank was matter-of-fact. It restrained you from the impulse to take the hands of Stella in yours and let cry against them the tears with which you could have reached out and wetted your fingers.

The matter-of-factness of Frank's voice. It was like one of the tickers in Dudley's office. It made the day drone as it could when you sat back with Bennet and Bobbie at play and just let their laughter and the buzzes of insects and the distant roar of city beat up against you in tiny commotion.

There wasn't very much to hear, except that two lonely young people, two incredibly lonely young people, Frank with that look of quiver to him, Stella who worked in an office, ate lunch in a bakery and slept in a Harlem flat, had just stumbled together . . . in the darkness of the loneliness. . . .

"We aren't apologizing for anything, Laurie. It's only this thing coming along makes it so damned awkward. Right now. That's about the sum and substance of it."

This thing. Stella's baby. There sat Frank kicking the turf with the toe of his shoe, a little angrily as he emphasized *this thing*. And Stella whose eyes were leaving the feeling of the black and blue marks whenever they looked at you.

"It's so awkward, you see, for Frank."

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Awkward for Frank. Awkward for Frank. What about awkward for Stella Genesee? There was your heart again, leaping toward her.

Of course. Awkward for Frank. Awkward for Frank.

"What's to be done?"

"That's the point, Laurie. You're so good, Laurie, and simple — maybe you can emote a way out where we haven't been able to think a way out. So far as Stella and I are concerned, everything is simple enough."

"Simple enough?"

"Yes. Stella has all the good 'sense there is. It's just the damned awkward scheme of the kind of world we find ourselves living in. Stella isn't sniveling around for marriage . . ."

"Sniveling around for marriage?"

"I mean ——"

"Frank means I feel about things pretty much as he does. Social taboo — nothing — can touch the beauty of the thing that has swept us together — if marriage is going to smirch it and make it a thing of burden instead of a thing of beauty for Frank ——"

For Frank. For Frank.

"You see, Laurie, it's a devilish circle of a situation. Everywhere I turn, I'm in it. Stella knows what's what with Father. God knows she's had opportunity to judge for herself. All right, then, say the Governor kicks me out. Well, where does that land me? I'm not a go-getter. Where is marriage going to help matters if I can't earn ——"

"No. No. You see, Miss Regan, I would never marry Frank unless it was to free him. That's the way we — used to plan it when we planned at all. Marriage must free Frank. Give him leisure to write. Frank isn't fitted for business. It's crushing him. He has talent. You must know it. I know it. That was my plan for us — some day. To free Frank, Miss Regan. Not to burden him."

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"Can't you see, Laurie — how we were swept together — swept by my need of her? Swept by her faith in me ——"

"I've always worked, Miss Regan. I've never known any different. I've been in business since I was fourteen. I could tide us over even now on what I earn, and I've a few hundred saved. Tide us over, I mean, until Frank's writings begin to earn for us and even if they shouldn't, and they will, that's my idea of the only real companionship between two people like us, Miss Regan. The logical kind of distribution of effort. Not just blind adherence to the social-inheritance idea that the male must get out and earn the livelihood if it happens to be the woman who is best qualified for it. If I cannot free Frank by marrying him, then it mustn't be!"

Frank. Frank. And Frank only sitting there kicking with his toes at the turf.

"You see, Laurie, Stella's like that. Ahead of her time and ahead of her sex and mine. She'll win you around to her way of thinking in the end, the way she did me. Only now, this *thing* coming up . . ."

This thing, again. You felt the eyes of Stella bruising you.

"Frank means this — thing makes it impossible in the beginning. We hadn't planned on that — for a long while to come, and then only after — after marriage. That's why the most important thing now is to find the best solution. If marriage isn't best for Frank, then I don't want it either. Of course, if the difficulty were just until baby is born that would be simple enough. — There's my mother, you see. I live with her. She's a seamstress and home all day — and then there's my few hundred saved. I'm so strong. I'm sure not to have to be away from my work more than a few weeks. Then there's Mother to — to be at home all day after I go back to work. We could really start, now, just the way we sometimes talked we might — that is, if we ever did start. I don't want, Miss Regan, to make it seem that Frank and I were ever definitely

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engaged to be married. It's just that whenever we did talk along these lines ——"

"She's a brick, Laurie."

"But why — why — why have you let this thing happen? You two. You knew the difficulties. What right had you to let it happen!"

"We aren't discussing that. It's something I doubt if you could ever understand. . . ."

"Miss Regan, we didn't let it happen. It was something as mysterious as tide and stars. When one loves . . . as we love . . . as I ——"

That was it! When one loved as Stella Genesee loved! Why, you could not take your eyes off her. There was that look in her eyes that had sometimes awakened you so irrelevantly out of your sleep . . . the look of Stella Genesee with Frank's coat sleeves held that day against her cheek. The look in them now. The look that made you feel that Dudley was being cheated.

The look in Stella Genesee's eyes that was not in your own for Dudley. You knew, now. You wanted terribly that look. You wanted it to flow over your body in the kind of ecstasy that made Stella Genesee, crowded into a corner, at bay with circumstance, terrified, seem somehow sublime.

Oh, you knew the ecstasy all right. You knew the bursting into flame of your heart. The ecstasy of love and renunciation and adoration.

You never passed your Beloved in His little pansy-edged shrine, or the figure of the Pieta on the parlor table, without feeling it.

You knew the feel behind the look in Stella Genesee's eyes. Tenfold. But not for Dudley.

Your mind kept sliding again, when it should have been stark on this dilemma which was suddenly happening to you so close that you could reach out and touch it.

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You knew the wrongness of it. The sordidness of it. Frank, with the fierce upward thrust to his head and the intangible profile of his, caught this way in the unspeakable vulgar mesh of an affair with a stenographer at the Yards.

You were revolted. It made your flesh run uphill in a little nausea.

Servant-girls hurriedly dismissed were caught in plights like this, and boys with turned-up collars and turned-down cap visors. Like Frank's. The horridness. You felt the tears, the scalding ones that come boiling out of humiliation and disgust . . . of revolted fastidiousness and your own offended and deep-dyed sense of right and wrong.

Frank who had done a vulgar immoral thing. Stella Gene-see. The shame and horridness. Frank Thomas Regan, reared in the fastness of the same kind of environment that you had been reared in. Frank, who had always seemed a little ill that life could be so gross. A coal strike in Lawrence, Kansas, and its revelation of the sordid details of man's inhumanity to man could make him broody for weeks. Once, *The Justice*, a radical weekly, had published a ten-line poem of his inspired by revolt against the spectacle of children who sit indoors making artificial flowers for hats. The sight of blood could sicken him, and Mother had literally spent what poor frayed nerves she had, sparring between him and Father to deflect the harshness.

Frank himself caught at something gross. And illicit. You could not withhold the tears of shame. They rolled in slow hot logs down along your cheeks.

"Oh, Frank — Frank — shame — you shouldn't have — have done this to — Mother. . . ."

That was the first flicker you had out of Frank. Frank who was perpetually all on edge with Mother. Frank who gritted his teeth in nervous agony when she asked him the one question too many, and her very first question could be just that, looking at you with a quiver over his face of white lightning.

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"That's the devil of it. Hang it, Laurie, that way she has of being — so bewildered and helpless and cried-out about it all — it's something that you have to experience with gnawing at the vitals of you, Stella, to know what Laurie and I mean about Mother — that — that damned bewildered look of Mother's that — twists you. Her clutching on. . . ."

Oh, how you knew it, too. The frail bur of Mother with that tenacity of hers to cling on so — with her eyes. To her children. To Frank, above all. The weak wrists. The little shoulders that seemed to want to meet in front like a warped old book closing. The old book that Father had flung aside. Almost kicked aside. So that hurt for her was in Frank, too. You reached out your hand. . . .

"But, Frank, you've never told me about your mother . . ."

"Because, Stella, there is nothing much to say. It's not easy to explain to you about the pulling kind of pitiableness of Mother. Laurie knows. I don't seem able to make it quite clear except that — she's wounded irrevocably."

"You do make it clear, Frank. And I mustn't make it seem as if I am pleading for my rights in the matter — or demanding — or even placing you in a position where you feel called upon to explain. What I did, after all, I did with my eyes open and of my own free will. The weakness and the wrong of it, if weakness and wrong they must be called, are mine as much as yours. Don't think, Miss Regan, that I am asking for anything that is not for the best of all concerned."

"Stella — my sister realizes that."

"I've tried to make it clear. It's just that we must find a solution. I can go away somewhere. I've always done everything alone. Self-taught people like me are — that way. I'm not afraid. It mustn't be awkward for Frank."

Awkward for Frank. Awkward for Frank.

This incredible girl, who very presently would be big with the social ignominy of carrying Frank's child out of wedlock,

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sitting there with the something luminous swimming up in her eyes every time she glanced at him.

To look at Stella Genesee when her gaze sort of flowed over to Frank was somehow to know the feeling of a cut artery bleeding.

That was actually the way Stella looked at Frank. The way you felt sometimes when the eyelids of the Max seemed to tremble on the verge of opening. That sense of your very heart blood swimming across your own eyes.

That was where you had seen that look before! No, not seen it. But felt it. That look of wanting to serve. Service of love. You who had dared to be revolted, as presently so many eyes would be revolted if Frank could not — did not — marry Stella.

Stella Genesee, whose love had been greater than her strength.

Poor Stella who gave so freely and in whose power lay her weakness, sitting crumpled there in the wide afternoon light, in her little ready-to-wear suit and her mouth drawn up into a scar from fearing to cry. You wanted suddenly and terribly again, as if the beautiful hands of Mother Agatha were fastened to your wrists, to reach out — to feel yourself wetted with the tears of Stella Genesee. You could no more have helped reaching out to Stella Genesee — and aiding and abetting Stella, there in her plight, to marry Frank.

The day that you, and you alone, knew that Stella Genesee and Frank were being married, Fleta and Mother and a little seamstress, named Ronnie, from one of Mother's uptown parishes, were cluttered all over your room, tying up stacks of adorable pink underthings with pink ribbons and puffs of sachet bags. Loveliest delicacies sewed by nuns. Your trousseau things. Most of them convent-made. The rises of scent every time anybody touched anything. All the little imita-

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tion smells of spring. The cool air that came through the open window and stirred the stray wisps of Mother's hair as she bent over the tying of the ribbons.

You kept wandering around, wanting, that of all afternoons, not to see that tired-looking hair of Mother's, until finally Fleta with her mouth full of pins said:

"Laura, for goodness' sake, sit down. You make me nervous."

Well, goodness knows you made yourself nervous. There was a straight line of scare from your throat down into the very pit of you.

Something which you had aided and abetted was about to fall in clap of thunder over the household. You felt yourself in a lull before a storm. Mother, who just could not get a bow tied, fumbling and bending there over the ribbons. Sometimes Fleta took one half-tied bow from her and substituted another.

"There, Mother, that's fine! Now, Ronnie, give Mother another." All the time retying her Mother's fumbled effort.

Even Fleta with her wide hips loose, sitting there with the boneless sag to her of a sack of flour. There was something ludicrous about the unsuspecting household. Father down in his office sitting with his short legs dangling and his hook of pipe down over his chest. Kate whose shoes always slippity-slopped so through the mornings, spatting with the palm of her hand every so often against the swinging door downstairs.

Ever since you could remember these little spattings had sounded through the mornings.

How sly you felt.

Sly and surreptitious and frightened and a little wise. To everyone else in that house, it was just another morning. A little more of tingle to it, perhaps, because in another eight such mornings you were going to walk out of it in all

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your new white finery, the veil flowing from you like strange enchanted hair.

Walk out of it into a terrifying little castle-in-the-air just one block removed from Mary's.

The castle in the air of being married. . . .

Bennet and Bobbie playing there on the white bear rug in the blessed unawareness of childhood. Pelting at one another in a shower of Fleta's do's and don'ts. Ronnie plodding her head and her feet at running the sewing machine. Mother at the bows. Spat-spat from Kate. The foul old smell of Father's pipe winding up and all the while to a beating as of horses' hoofs through your brain, Stella and Frank. Stella and Frank.

Largely through your conniving, off they were, probably at the very moment, being married. Surely they were in Lakewood by now. . . .

By nine o'clock that night the telegram was to come. You had connived that too, with Frank and Stella, that it arrive after the children were abed. And while Dudley was there, to deflect from it some of the intimacies of family scene.

By nine o'clock . . . you could feel, in anticipation, the messenger's ring of the electric doorbell bore through the center of you.

The somnolent workaday morning full of the putterings over you, while Frank and Stella Genesee, with your aid and abetment, were doing this thing. Frank Regan, your father's only son, and Stella Genesee, who typed in his office and who was with child. Frank's child.

There was hot fluid through your veins. You could not for the life of you sit still. With scare. Scare of the pity in you that had dared to aid and abet Stella Genesee.

The incertitude of Frank up to the very last! The something after the moment of decision that had kept his face quivering with the heat lightning of his nervous agony. You knew. You knew. The clinging burs of Mother's eyes against his.

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Dread of the way Father's jaw could lock, like the hasp of a trunk.

You pitied even more than you understood, but your intuition spread itself out like wings. You knew with your pity as well as Stella Genesee must have known with her heart, the frailties of Frank. And his curious pent-up beauties.

His secret quivering hurtings. Once you understood, you forgave Frank his vacillation — his fear — Stella Genesee knew.

And yet you could not sit still for scare. The filching of some of your own trousseau things into Stella's bag. The furtive packing of Frank's.

You noticed for the first time that morning, that Mother, at her futile going up and down of stairs, never passed Frank's door without glancing at it. Once she even stopped, and with a newly initialed cuptowel of your trousseau in her hand, rubbed at the door knob.

Of all days, this day of Stella and Frank off marrying now in Lakewood, Mother there rubbing at the knob of the door that led to Frank's room. Almost a little tenderly you thought, in your state of scare.

The buzz of the electric bell that was to be rung at nine by a messenger, boring and boring at you. And Fleta forever tucking in stray strands of her hair and with her mouth full of pins:

"Laurie, where are those pink gowns of yours with the lace butterflies?"

Where? Why, those were the three you had filched for Stella's bag! You could feel the chase of pallor along your cheeks.

"Where? Oh, never mind those now, dear. Here — here — let's tie up these sweetie white ones. . . ."

The chasing pallor — Ronnie's feet treading at the sewing-machine pedal. Routine.

.. You snatched up little Bobbie and kissed him down into

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his neck until he cried. Of scare. You ran up and downstairs at useless chores. Of scare.

That slow, almost stock-still morning. You wanted to rush it along — to hurl yourself through. Then to hold it back. Never to let it pass.

"Laurie, does Mary know about the ruchings?"

"Yes, she wants hers pink. Darling pink puffs around her neck."

Mary was to be your only gay attendant. Mother and Fleta would be somber. Mary would follow you up the aisle in a cloud of coral tulle.

"Ah me, I had ruchings around my bouquet. But white. Yours were white too, Fleta."

"Yes — Mother."

Mother and Fleta who were somber, fingering over the tulles.

Was that Father stumping his cane for Victor? What if he should suddenly demand the presence of Frank or Stella? You too dreaded for Frank that hasp-like locking of Father's jaw. Nine o'clock to-night. The coming of the little message that you had helped plan. . . .

Oh, but it was good when Dudley telephoned. His great voice booming over the wire. His laugh. His calling you Pussy-Beautifulness. His asking you such an absurd question. The ridiculousness of it! "How's your *noblesse oblige*, Pussy-Beautiful?" It didn't mean anything. Not a single thing. It was just a phrase worked into a tapestry that had hung beside your table one afternoon at the Biltmore when you were tea-dancing. You had been nonsensical about it. About everything — that afternoon of being gay at the Biltmore. "How's your *noblesse oblige*?" Dudley had insisted upon asking everybody. Dudley — silly — you!

But just the same it made the morning suddenly warm and normal to hear the boom of Dudley's nonsense over the wire.

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When Dudley once learned about Frank and Stella he would throw back his great old shag of head and laugh and shake where his jowls were beginning to be ever so little loose.

Dear Dudley. So warm. So normal. Yes, you would be ready to go motoring out to Paradise Point at two. Mary and Jerry and you and Dudley. You loved going. It meant speeding through the tedium of that long afternoon. Speeding through it, streamers of breeze in your eyes and your hair, snuggled up close to the warm eupeptic roughness of Dudley at the wheel.

Suddenly, because he was just a vigorous normal part of the everyday scheme of things, you longed for the sandy roughness of Dudley. Big, bathed, shaved, snow-smelling Dudley.

Of course you would be ready at two! Dear — dear — Dud —

What a day! The taste of the coming lilac. No, or was it the smell of lilac? Well, both! That was part of the joy. There was simply no telling. The senses were jagged. The taste of air that was mealy with softness. All the little smells that came screwing up just as surely as worms, from the damp black cowl-like earth of the countryside. The dripping sweet promise of white-lilacs. Dripping sweet promise of apple trees actually in bloom. Out beyond Tarrytown a gilt flush of half a mile of forsythia drew from Mary her highest pitch of squeal.

Of all the spring jags! The four of you with Dudley crouched at the wheel and his teeth bare, riding through the afternoon that was simply mealy with softness.

There was a certain way you liked to sit, with your head tilted and your eyes slits so that all the rush of air and scene were just fragrance, with you softly in the center of the great ball of — spinning — zzzzzzz —

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"Comfortable, Pussy-Beautiful?"

M-mmmmmmmmmmmmmmm!

"How's your *noblesse oblige*?"

Oh, but it was fun to feel tickled and sit there with your eyes half closed. How's your *noblesse oblige*? Of all the stuff and nonsense!

The remoteness. The remoteness of Mary and Jerry crouched there in the mood of stuff and nonsense, in the absurd little rear seat of Dudley's broad low roadster.

The remoteness of Frank and Stella, even while the thought of them sent a jab through you. But such a gay jab now that you were out of doors. The remoteness of Dudley, even when his tweed sleeve moved a little along your cheek every time he budged at the wheel.

Something of your sense of that remoteness must have shot through him, because once he said through the wind in his teeth:

"Laurie, why don't you snuggle up and be a regular little darling, like Mary back there? You're so put away, Laurie. Looks like a big old truck like me can't ever get in and find you."

Now for Dudley to say that! It gave you a quick sting of tears against your eyeballs. Was it that Dudley missed the something? No. No. It wasn't true that you didn't love Dudley. In your own way, you did. With all your heart. And more, you were going to love him precisely the same way Mary loved Jerry.

"Why, Dudley dear," you said, and snuggled up as Mary in the narrow rear seat was snuggling, "you're the dearest dear."

"And so are you, Laurie, twenty dearest-dears," said Dudley, and took his hand perilously off the steering wheel and Jerry shouted: "Whoa, there — grade crossing ahead! No petting the chauffeur."

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"Dudley, you mustn't ever feel anything but — but all right about me — us — everything."

"All right. Why, sweet-beautiful, I can't wait the week."

The week. The week. The week. It was rushing at you like the wind. The week. The week. The week.

"In one week's time. I'll show the world!"

Dudley at showing the world. Nothing would do but tea at Paradise Point, although everyone except Dud was for lunch on a knoll under a tree.

The Walshes had brought along their patent-leather hamper with porcelain plates and cunningly fitted flasks and there were rows of sandwiches in oiled paper and a bowl of salad that had come from Sherry's.

But with his gay kind of tenacity, Dudley's heart was set on Paradise Point Inn. Tea time. Saturday afternoon. You knew why! "I'll show the world." Dudley at showing the world! Mary with her little pink adder tongue shooting out, knew too, chaffingly.

"All right, Dud, have it your own way. Parade her into Paradise Inn, and Jerry and I will modestly bring up the rear and the toddy."

You didn't mind. Not much. Dudley was like that. As whole-heartedly proud of you as if you were not only his, but his achievement. It was like indulging a child, to consent to walk into a crowded room with him. He was like a big laugh blowing along behind you, and even if your flesh shrank a bit, you knew how steadfastly he was holding his head straight, but how his eyes were darting. Pride. Pride in you.

And so you had tea at Paradise Point Inn, a gay place for motorists, and Dud made you take off your hat in the merry crowded room because he said it made his head ache. But you knew why and Mary did too, because she laughed and threw a ball made out of cinnamon toast at Dud.

It was because your head came out of the shady hat like a

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little sun. A smooth yellow egg, the brightness of sun. And there were glances at you. And even stares. There had always been stares ever since you were a tiny child. Even at convent you remembered how the stares of the girls could rise over their books at you during study hour. It made you glad for Dud and for yourself too — in the way that could make you seem to purr sometimes at yourself in the cheval mirror.

Once at this very Paradise Point Inn a motion-picture director had seen you with Dud and asked to meet you. Dud's large emphatic air of waving aside, and yet the flush that had run up out of his collar. Pride of ownership. He could scarcely keep his eyes or his smile off you the rest of that afternoon.

Your voice was a fluty little one that wouldn't carry, but they were always wanting you for plays. At convent. And both years since your graduation, the Junior Society had asked you to take part in the annual benefit at the Plaza. Father contributed largely and annually to the philanthropics of the Senior organization and one of the years he had wanted you to consent. And you did and had been the very center of the prize tableau group, posed by Ben Galli-Braun and called *The Birth of Beauty*.

Later Galli-Braun had asked to paint you, but at the second sitting his way of touching your throat and your bare shoulders as if his hands were magnetized made you fidget and besides, sitting there with your hand clutching the silver scarf that was supposed to be falling away from the knoll of your shoulder, made you so very sleepy. Sleepy as Kate who accompanied you to these séances, dozing on a throne chair while she waited. And so, you never went back . . . Galli-Braun disappointed, annoyed and thinking you silly.

Neither had the prize group been very much fun. It did not turn out to be the most popular thing to have been chosen for the center of the *Birth of Beauty* group, the moment you had walked into the Plaza ballroom for rehearsal that morning.

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You hadn't cared particularly that you were chosen. In fact it too made you a little sleepy. All the buzz around you — the buzzings of the girls — the flashings of their lip sticks — the hunchy movements with cigarettes. The warm thick smells. The daubings and puffings into mirrors the size of a dollar. Girls with little peaks to their bobbed heads in back. The shush of soft things as Galli-Braun, with his magnetized hands, posed them . . . it was the thick warm smell of them so close about you, made you so sleepy. . . .

Even the plays that Dudley and Mary and Jerry liked, musical shows and reviews and farces bang full of doors, made you sleepy, too.

There had been a morality play once, called Every Man, given by one of Mother's poor little sodalities, and you had gone with her and wept softly. Mother dozed to the speeches that had a solemn rhythm. You sat on the edge of your chair and gripped it.

And, of course, Nun among the Lilies. The aisle of the cotton, yellow-calyxed ones that you and Mary had shopped, parting before you softly as you walked. The wimple that hugged your chin and made your face to shine. *There* was a play that lay softly in your heart! Frank's play. . . .

Frank and Stella Genesee! For the moment, with the laughter about, and the table beside a window that overlooked terrace and Hudson River, and the one after another of the leather-smelling and veil-streaming motor-parties trooping in famished for tea in etched glasses, you had almost forgotten. . . .

You remembered then, constantly, until it was time to turn home. Around nine o'clock the messenger would ring the bell . . . and Dudley and — and everybody would know the secret.

On the drive in, Dudley made a wide detour. There was that faculty about Dudley. Remembering trifles that pleased

you. Chiefly because they were such trifles. The four lumps that you shamelessly liked in your demi-tasse. Flowers for Mother on Easter. And of all things, a patent remedy for Kate he had brought one night, remembering the sore-throat rag. Leave it to Dudley to remember that you preferred a one-flower perfume, or kept fresh pansies on your little shrine, or liked sheer trifles of handkerchiefs that you could poke into your glove hole.

And now Dudley remembering to turn off at Tarrytown in order to pass St. Vincent's because there might be some belated pussy-willows. You could have hugged him and did!

"Oh, Dudley — you darling — I know . . . we're to pass by St. Vincent's!"

"Pussy willows for my pussy!"

"Well, little pussy will do the climbing for her willows! This little pussy remembers last year's shinned knees."

That from Mary. Curious about Mary. You could never get her to want to drive out to St. Vincent's except to sit in the car and wait while you dashed in for a precious moment of visit with Mother Agatha or Sister Letitia who was bed-ridden and for whom Mother knitted foot-warmers.

The chapel of St. Vincent's. Just the second of its sweetness that awaited you on these all-too-rare visits could enfold you like sweet linen.

Your old seat the third pew to the right. Mass after mass that had been solemnized there before your little-girl eyes. Miracle of the sacrament. Wafers of His flesh. Wine of His blood. There before your adoring eyes. Sometimes you could slide into the same third-row seat, on these all-too-brief visits of yours, and closing your eyes, let the sense of flowing sacrament wash you — wine of His blood. And that sense of flowing was tears. Tears for the Blessed Sacrament. The miracle of the wine and the wafer. The taking into your very being of Him. That was marriage supernal. . . .

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St. Vincent's stood on the peak of a knoll of land that was shaped like a very fat man lying prone upon his back. The old building, all flushed with ivy, stood on the very peak of his belly and faced the river. You could see it from the train as you came down from having visited Fleta in Albany. That is, if you squinted up at just the right angle. Long and low and with a life-size stone Virgin Mary on the terrace.

The new building, completed since you and Mary had graduated, huddled behind the benign spread of the mother house and was encircled with a gravel drive the shape of a swung lariat.

Dudley and Mary and Jerry waited in the car along this driveway while you ran along the curve of granitoid that led around to the entrance of the "old building."

The old building with its deep-set windows. Contemplative windows. Unlike the new, with its row of staring sunlight-factory windows. Shallow set-on looking windows like — Mary's eyes. But the old building, frowning there under ivy eyebrows in a meditation that you loved. . . .

Part of being a graduate of St. Vincent's was that then you were allowed to enter from the front. Up the steep front steps across the gallery just as if you were a monsignor and to your ring a lay sister with her inseparable jangle of keys swinging back the dear ponderous walnut doors with the apostles carved along them, and the breath of the convent coming out to greet you.

Smell of God. A combination of sunlessness and incense and of dearness; a combination of the sort of lye that kept the corridors of St. Vincent's so spotlessly clean; of cold stone, dormitory food and the soft starchiness of wimples.

Dear St. Vincent's. And dear Mother Agatha her very self, all these months since you had graduated, coming always to greet you personally with her slow sweet hands held out ahead of her in the shape of benediction.

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You couldn't help it, feeling each time the little ecstasy of a home-coming.

"Mother Agatha!"

"It's dear Laurie come back to us."

Dear Laurie come back to us. As if Laurie had ever left, was what you knew in your heart. You burrowed into Mother's embrace. Deep in. So that you could feel the shape of her silver crucifix against you.

"Mother, I'd come back every day if I dared."

"If you dared, Laurie?" The soft vise of Mother's hand pinching your cheeks together and her eyes, pools without ripple, searching yours: "If you dared?"

"I mean, Mother, if I dared take the time. You see, Mother Agatha, it's just a week now — seven days ——"

"Dear, dear child. We must light a candle for you every day — now. Our little Laurie about to be married. It seems only yesterday we had you with us."

"I'm with you yet, Mother. Sometimes almost too much ——"

"What do you mean, child?"

"I mean — you see, Mother — when one is to be married there are so many new considerations should — must come first."

"Nothing before our Savior."

"No. No. Only when one makes an earthly marriage, Mother — when the beloved is a man — not *your* Beloved, Mother — my *earthly* one — there are things — I mean, Mother, when one is marrying a man, a dear earthly man who . . ."

"I know. A dear human man who thinks his Sunday mornings are for sleep and not for mass. Bless him, I know. Rascals. I know them all. They come down in droves and steal our lamby girls out of the fold. Ah, but from what they tell me yours is a fine lad, Laurie. A good lad that a good wife can make better by leading him to his Savior. . . . Bring him to God, Laurie."

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You could not find the words to tell Mother Agatha how Dudley would not be brought. Bringing Dudley to God. It made your own eyes crinkle. You could not convey to her the good-natured kind of mock dismay into which the mere suggestion threw him. You could not bring yourself to tell her that even now Dudley was on the drive and would not be brought in.

It was quiet and easier and sweeter just to sit there in the visitors' parlor with your hands tucked like young white wings into the shelter of Mother Agatha's and her dear unlined rotund face, with its expression of having looked unflinchingly at the sun, leveled at you.

The precise visitors' parlor of equidistant objects. The oval center table with a marble top with veining through it lurid and varicose-looking. The base-burner, out of use now, but standing anointed with the concentrated elbow grease of processions of lay sisters. A pair of alabaster hands, clasping, on the mantelpiece, and the two blue glass vases with creamy warts and creamy glass fluting around the tops.

The long windows, precise in starched lace curtains, overlooking one of the loveliest bends of Hudson River, and the gold-framed Christus between them crowned in stabbing thorns and the tears down His cheeks the shapes of drops of blood.

You knew that room so well. The solemn odor of visits from Mother and Father and Fleta hung over it. And Antiphlogistine. Mother had always brought you bags of asafetida. That room. The smell of it reminding you of the time you had been called into it to receive the summons home the time of Father's first stroke.

The Old Testament with the filigree clasps on the three-cornered whatnot. The dried sumac in the grate that had antedated the base-burner. The portrait of a deceased cardinal in his reds and with a very prominent forefinger as if from the

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burden of the ring. A lithograph of the terrific disaster of Lucifer being hurled down from heaven on a jag of lightning. Once you had been reprimanded for breathing on the glass of that picture and writing your name on it.

There was a nun, a dear one, Sister Theresa, talking low and earnestly to a young man visitor beside the three-cornered whatnot. You and Mother Agatha sat on the slippery horse-hair couch between the windows, your hands, the slim wings, in hers as if they could not draw themselves out again.

"Laurie, how are things at home? Father? Mother? Fleta? Ah me, it seems only yesterday we had Fleta with us."

There was so much you wanted to pour forth to Mother Agatha. Fleta! Stella and Frank. The swirls and the eddies that were pulling at you. That were carrying you along too swiftly. But there was not time! There was not time to stay there, even, with your hands in Mother Agatha's.

Dudley had already honked his three long and three shorts, from the drive, and once a burst of Mary's laughter splattered in through the window all over the quiet.

"Oh, Mother — dear — mayn't I come out to-morrow — all day, *with you?* There's so much — perhaps Father'll let me have the car — there's so much ——"

"So much what, dear child?"

"So much — so much help, Mother — that I need. I — I mean it's scary, isn't it, dear Mother — getting married — after one has been — just a girl — all the time — it makes you feel funny — not quite knowing — if you want to stop being just a girl — ever — it gives you a feeling, dear Mother — like an elevator going down too fast ——"

The little ripple of laughter across the clear of Mother Agatha's eyes. You felt suddenly young enough and foolish enough and frail enough to be folded close into the rough black folds of Mother Agatha. The dear gruff folds that you could feel stirring a little with laughter.

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"Bless your heart, child, come out and stay with us up to the very last minute of it, if that will make you feel any better. There's a many a one before you has been frightened out of her dear little wits and a many a one will come after you. Tut, there is no use, my child, making such a serious business beforehand, of what is sure to be serious business for certain once you get into it. Bless my soul, as Father Flaherty was saying yesterday, then's when the seriousness only begins! Did you know Father Flaherty is well of his sciatica, child?"

There was Mother Agatha for you. So dear. So human. So full of the small talk of bazaar aprons and the little epidemic of mumps among the lay sisters and Father Deneen's visit to the infirmary last week and the year's prospect for raspberry cordial from the vineyards and the project for obtaining five more acres of river frontage and Sister Celesta's cooking classes and the new tulip shoots for the hothouse and Willie the gardener's asthma and the six picked girls to be loaned to Mercy House for their annual Passion Play and the shortage of dormitory sheets and Father Riley's spells of vertigo and the appearance of water bugs in the pantries and the petition before the New York Central for two trains a day to stop at Mount Vincent; a deathless ambition for a rose-point altar cloth; coarse salt to keep down the weeds between bricks in the courtyard; the day's calamity of scorched gruel for the new juniors' breakfast; a novitiate in the agonies of mental uncertainty; the high cost of fertilizer; thumb tacks for the drawing classes; sacramental wafers to be ordered; Minnie Anchutz snickering at high mass; arnica for Sister Alvitus's wrist.

That was the way of her busy days. From God to gooseberries. You knew from the time that you had been her little pet servitor pupil. And now there you were, just another knot on the string of Mother Agatha's busy days. The feel of her laughing softly there under the roughness of her serge. Dear

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workaday Mother Agatha, who could be so human that in her understanding she became sublime. You had seen her with her bare hands ministering to a cat with running sores for eyes, her mind on a grocery list, and her face drenched in God.

You knew now that when Mother Agatha laughed, it was because she knew you were being a child again, but the very shape of her drapes, the flow of them about you made an arch that led you to the cathedral of her heart.

"Bless you, child, we'll have to spank you and then tie a bell around your neck and call in your fine young suitor so you can't run away before the wedding day. That's the way with my girls getting themselves engaged to one handsome heathen after another and then running home to Mother Agatha to know what it's all about. Get you along, child, before I spank."

And didn't Mother Agatha spank you! Softly. So that you laughed right into the tears and wouldn't raise your head for her to behold the silly spectacle and the crucifix hurt against you in the loved shape of the cross and even if you were a little hysterical you didn't mind — deep as you were in the arch of the drapes that led you to Mother Agatha.

"There, there, my child. I've a business meeting of my Board now. Come out to-morrow and stay as long as your heart desires. There is only one peace, Laurie. Love of Him. You are a frightened lamb and you need some of Mother Agatha's common sense talked into you. Button up there, child, there's two cases of quinsy sore throat in the primaries this week from winter woollens off too soon. We will pray for you, dear child. Remember, marriage is a great sacrament, says St. Paul, but I speak in Christ and in the Church. And pray, Laurie — go into the chapel now and pray, Laurie — pray to be worthy of His love which passeth understanding."

"Mother Agatha — dearest ——"

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There it hung. Peace. As if the chapel were a bell with a clapper whose note was of a singular clarity that was fainter than silence.

You tiptoed down the aisle to your own seat. You had genuflected beside that pew and sidled your own way in when your legs had dangled short off the floor like a sawdust doll's.

You never entered that chapel without the feeling that could become a hard little rubber ball of a sob in your throat. Something of you, the preciousness of certain aspects of your little girlhood, had stayed back in that chapel. Tucked out of the way to make room for the new little girls. Tucked up in the arches, behind stone fretwork, high up over the apse. Like old birds' nests with the dent of you in them — empty now, but not quite cold. The little girl you, with the one clear distilled adoration. The same adoration that made Mother Agatha's eyes look as if she could gaze upon the sun without blinking.

There He lay to the right of the altar in the writhe of all pain. Sublime torment of His marble flesh. Gape of the wounds that the sculptor had made seem to hurt. . . .

There were three novitiates in half veils on their knees. The washing silence. You could have walked up there beside them on your knees, if you had dared, and laid your forehead to His marble couch. It was almost again, for the moment, like the preciousness of being a little girl. Love. Love of Him. Undiluted. It flowed through you in a natural spring. You could no more have helped it than — than Stella Genesee could help the torrent of her earthly love. You wanted, because you loved, to walk up there on your knees over rough places, if need be, that made them bleed. You wanted, because love is service, to put your lips to the gaping wounds and even give them of your own flesh, which you loved to vanity, to make whole the gaps. . . .

"I believe in Thee, O my Jesus, present in the holy — the most holy ——"

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The learned-by-heart devotionals — sometimes you stumbled over them — “The most holy sacrament of the altar; I love Thee above all things. . . . I embrace Thee . . . and unite myself to Thee as if Thou wert already within my heart. Oh, never let me be separated from Thee. O Lord, Jesus Christ, let the sweet and consuming force of Thy love absorb my soul that I may die for love of Thee who was pleased to die upon the cross for love of me. . . . I embrace Thee — I love Thee above all things — Beloved —”

The splatter of Mary’s laughter against the silence. The sweet silence. The perfumed-with-Him silence.

The three long honks and three short honks. Sharp now and in rapid succession. . . .

“Beloved — Beloved — my Sweet Heart — I embrace Thee — I love Thee above all things —”

The three long honks and the three short honks.

Outside the sun lay all over the lawn and the terraces, and Willis, the old gardener, gave you a sprig of forsythia as you hurried down the curve of asphalt toward the lariat of gravel drive.

Walking toward the automobile, which stuck out at grotesque angles with pussy-willow boughs, you felt as if you must have fainted ecstatically and this warm dash of spring was bringing you to. Reluctantly.

Dudley was good and rueful. Cutting you a high fine arm of the pussy willow, he had snagged the knee to his excellent tweeds, and on the drive in, you were kept busy petting the snagged place to make it well and Jerry had saved you a high-ball and even though you held the cup with both hands and drank it down to please him, it kept lopping out over the sides and along your arm, because Dudley teased so by whizzing along faster to make it lop faster.

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Everybody was hilarious. A fummy little hilarity that you could smell every time Mary opened her red lips to laugh and every time Dudley leaned over to gather you up until you were almost directly under his steering wheel.

The same fuminess that came out of the cup that screwed on to the top of the thermos bottle.

You wanted to laugh too. Naughty! The highball had been too amber. You wanted to laugh. Easily, like Mary back there with Jerry. It had been dear of Dudley shinning his knee at cutting the pussy willow for you. Somehow one didn't expect Dud in his broad-shouldered, belted-in tweeds — a shade too smart, and the streak of platinum chain and platinum cigar-cutter across his waistcoat, also a shade too smart, to bother about shinning his knee for pussy willow —

If you said that often enough it became deliciously silly. . . . Shinning his knee for pussy willow. *Shinning* his knee — Skinning — his shin — shinning his skin — oh, silly —

That was part of Dud's genial sweetness. Dud of all people, remembering pussy willow, or throat remedy for Kate, or Mother on Easter Sunday. That was probably why Dudley turned such an easy dollar, even in the grimmest street in the world. Wall Street. There was no dousing him. It was not that one trusted him particularly more than the next. Hang it all, one liked him!

You felt his warmth and the warmth of the highball that had lopped. The warmth. The warmth of the languid rim of the afternoon and your sense of Mary and Jerry huddled there in the back seat and it was easier to laugh than it had been all day and the flush of forsythia was so swift now that it was little more than a buzz as you passed it and the faster you leaped, the faster you . . .

"Dudley!"

"For God's sakes, man, throw your brakes!" E-e-e-e-e-e-e!

"Oh — ah — no — no — no — no!"

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"No. No. No-o-o-o. Mother of God!" Gri-i-i-ind.

"Uh — save me — God ——" Gr-i-i-i-ind ——

You remembered. You remembered as everything turned over. You remembered, all in an instant of the whitest lightning flash! You remembered, sillily enough, a house in Yonkers where Father had once taken you and Fleta and there had been cherries on a branch on a tree in the garden. They had looked just like earrings and you had nibbled them right off the tree, pulling them with your lips like a little pony, and been spanked by Fleta for being selfish.

You remembered. You remembered. All in the lightning flash. There had been a girl named Dora Flitcraft, a horrid little girl with a snuffle who had lost her petticoat at first communion just before you fainted and you had given her a safety pin from your veiling.

Veiling . . . veiling . . . enchanted hair. . . .

There were pansies in square baskets for sale on Columbus Avenue — bare hands all over your bare neck and shoulders. Galli-Braun. Ugh, go away.

Once you had stumbled across Mother crying in your clothes closet with her handkerchief crammed all the way into her mouth.

Ashfurth Ropps had brushed against you once, in a hallway. Closely. Deliciously.

Oh, Father dear — shame — Father hated the Regans for being beautiful. All except you. You were a pussy in his heart and had crept there. Once the caster had come off the dining-room table and Father had kicked it as if the leg had been alive.

"Frank — Stella — I'll be there when the message comes at nine."

"Frank, I found your collar button here under the hall chair." Crash. Gri-i-i-i-i—— "Mother of God — Dudley, jump! Save me, Jesus."

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Jerry's wildly spread hand, with the splatter of something red across it, shooting up that way. Shooting up like a shriek . . .

The car on its back like a dead cockroach. You could sharpen scissors against wheels when they stood like that. Well, well, everybody sitting but you. Pale greasinesses. Faces. That's what they were and a little red trickle down one. Faces. Jerry's. Pale round tallow-looking spud. Garunchi. Garunchi. Garunchi.

There was a red smear across Jerry's brow as if he were grinning at you with his forehead! "Stop that!"

Mary in his arms laughing as if her heart would break. Dudley smeared. Dudley smeared with pallor and with dirt.

"My darling — Laurie, my darling — how hurt are you — my darling ——"

You started to get up to sharpen the scissors against the wheels while they stood upside down like that, but something so terrible cut everything in two and the hurt part of you began rolling down a shoulder of darkness. Garunchi. Garunchi. Garunchi.

BOOK II

BOOK II

THE worst thing about compound fracture of the shoulder was the rigid cast that cut so into your neck and made your entire left side feel as if fire were eating along it precisely the way you had seen old grass burning alongside railroad tracks. Your left side, these nine endless weeks had always that sensation of flame licking along it.

At first, sometimes, down under the sweet sheets, you drew your right foot up to touch your left knee with it, for the reassuring cool of the flesh. But after a while it was easier just to lie and let the flame chew along the left of you, because your right foot, for some silly reason, was too tired to make the journey up to left knee. Simply would not lift.

Funny thing about that lifting. The longer you lay and the more and more rested you became, the tireder you grew. Actually sometimes you came out of sleep with a fatigue that was almost unbearable. You used to lie and just cry with it. Too leaden to lift your unbandaged hand to the tears so that they dried upon your cheeks, or someone, the nurse or Mother, or once even Father, wiped them away for you.

You see, it was after the breaking and resetting of the shoulder that the fatigue came on. It wasn't so bad, at first. Even those weeks at the hospital. After all, they had been flower-filled weeks, full of the expectancy of quick recovery.

But then the rebreaking and the resetting because two of the three broken places in the shoulder had not knitted properly. That, you supposed, was what was making you so tired. Too tired to help the bones to knit again. . . .

That was why they had moved you home from the hospital. To buoy you up and make you help with the bone-knitting.

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That was what Dr. Riley said you needed most. Buoying up! And of course it was good to be home in your own bed where you could see yourself in the cheval mirror. Kate with the sore-throat rag around her neck bringing up the pretty trays that Mother had fussed over. Miss MacAfee, daintiest of nurses, the same who had nursed Frank, crooning and ejaculating to make the food somehow seem palatable to you and feeding you mouthful by mouthful as if you were a bird. Father being led upstairs by Victor and sitting for one hour every afternoon beside your bed with his feet dangling off the floor, smoking his pipe and silent for the most part of the hour.

Dear Dud. Popping in sometimes on his way downtown and every single evening on his way home. Mary. Fleta running down from Albany without the children and just for a week-end look at you. Dear Dr. Riley. The girls of the junior sodality and flowers from the group of them. Oh, it was pleasant being at home again, except for the tiredness. You felt as if someone had emptied a sack of flour and you lying there in your flat little white little crumple, were the sack. . . .

Sometimes you said whole nightfuls of running prayers against that tiredness. The tincture of iron in the blue bottle on the tableful of bottles beside your bed was also against that tiredness. Miss MacAfee's massaging you, Dudley's coaxing you, Dr. Riley's persuading you — all conspiring to rid you of the foolish inertia and the limpness of lying there like the white sack that had been emptied.

It was the tedium, you thought! The tedium of waiting all over again after the resetting for the shoulder to knit once more. The tedium. The tedium. The tedium. Yes, that was it.

Dear Dudley, you could never stop blessing him for helping so with the tedium. The heaped-up fragrance of his flowers. His everlasting contrition. He had actually lost flesh and

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seemed a little pale and his waistcoat hung. As if anybody blamed him. You least of all. That corkscrew curve of road out there had been the scene of another just such accident as yours the very day after, ending so disastrously that you shuddered when you thought of it. A woman and two men had been killed outright and the chauffeur was lying right now in a Staten Island hospital with a dreadfully maimed face and broken body.

You sent him of your flowers every week.

Sometimes your own face fascinated you so in the cheval mirror that you lay for entire mornings regarding the miracle of its unmarred creaminess. You could almost have purred and did make little noises the way you used to when you could curl up like a cat. Only now — the tiredness — one was too tired to purr. One was almost too tired to keep reassuring Dudley.

One evening when you thought Dudley was just leaning over to kiss you on his favorite soft little white spot on your throat, something clicked in the tiniest fashion and the coolest ripple ran about your neck, so that your hand, which you seldom even raised, leaped up.

"Dudley? What ——"

"Something beautiful for my Beautiful."

"What? What? Miss MacAfee, the hand mirror! Dudley, what is it? I can't wait. Tell me. Oh, I know. I feel. Little darling whispers. Pearls."

"Miss MacAfee, look there, will you! They don't show! Her skin melts them right in. Beat that? Right in. What's the good putting pearls on her. She is one. All over."

Sure enough. Lovely matched string of them, there they lay against the tinting of your own flesh, half dissolved because your flesh and their flesh were so identical. It made the bright tears spring. The chauffeur lying maimed in a Staten Island hospital and you there with the contour that you so loved to feel, creamier than pearls.

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Lovely, closed eyes of pearls — you could feel them quiver against your neck. Quiver like — like the lids of the Max ——

That was the night you lifted your unbandaged arm all the way up and fastened it about Dudley's neck and Miss MacAfee included that act of volition in her telephone report to Dr. Riley.

A wave of such pity for Dudley was over you. He had broken his doll. You. And suddenly you were ashamed of the thing. The thing in you that made it easier to lie there broken than to — to — mend ——

"Dudley dearest — you are so good to me!"

"My little Snow-White, you are so good to me. Not to hate me!"

Sh-h-h! You put up your finger against his lips so that he caught at it with his two great hands.

"Laurie, you're getting well! You haven't moved this much since you are home from the hospital."

"I've been horrid, Dudley. So tired. I've kept you so anxious. Dearest, would it please you — would it make you happy if I were to say to-morrow — we'll have Father Hearn here — beside my bed — to marry us! Dudley, would that make you happy?"

"Why, Laurie. Why, Laurie." You could feel his breathing in two strong warm streams. "Where did you get that idea?"

"It's because I haven't helped much, Dud, in getting well. Haven't been good to you. I've been so knocked out. Not thinking enough of you. Our little apartment there and waiting. You. When we should have been married and living in it. You just tortured like this with waiting, and me lying here not helping enough . . . to get well for you."

"Laurie . . ."

"It's only three weeks now until they take the cast off

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again. It's sure to have set right this time, dear, because it doesn't pain in the cast the way it did last time when the bones were overlapping. Both doctors are sure of it. Dudley dear, will it make you happy if we have Father Hearn marry us here at my bedside, to-morrow? Just quietly — here."

"Just quietly! Laurie Fairy, not much! You think that when a man has waited this long he is going to give up walking down the aisle so folks can see what a lucky dog he is. Do you think I'm going to be cheated out of stepping all over my wife's white satin and getting tangled up in the wedding veil? I'll show the world."

I'll show the world. I'll show the world.

"One week after the cast is removed will make it about — let's see — five — six — about September tenth! What day's that? There's something about September tenth suits me fine for a wedding date. Sweetheart, why don't you say something? How is September tenth?"

It was simpler just to lie back like the little limp sack again . . . so pleasantly, pleasantly, limp. . . .

Curious, this business of getting better. It was largely as you willed it. Of course it would never do to tell that to Dr. Riley, but one day as you were taking a teaspoonful of the tonic, you could not resist looking up at him over the rim of the spoon with a squint.

"My cure doesn't come out of a bottle, Dr. Riley. I know that. It's here — tucked away inside of me, along with my will to live and to button my shoes and to cross the street and to buy spring bonnets."

Whack went Dr. Riley's hand across his knee, and away he jerked the spoon from Miss MacAfee's hand in its very act of being tilted.

"Now you are lisping one of the great truths of therapeutics, infant. Will power! Take your dose in will power. I'll

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throw away every bottle on this table. Miss MacAfee, clear out these bottles. Our little alabaster saint here has had a vision."

Well, of all things! To take you at your word like that. You hadn't meant it so literally as that! It was a little frightening — the bottles suddenly gone from the table — one hadn't meant it so literally as all that! The will to get well. . . .

"But, Dr. Riley ——"

"No buts. All you need is to make that state of mind of yours behave as well as your shoulder. You've let it slack up on you, honey."

"But the iron tonic, Dr. Riley ——"

"The iron will, you mean. Lift up that bandaged arm of yours and tuck that little yellow curl behind that little pink ear! Lift!"

"I — can't ——"

"Nonsense. Every test we've taken, shows you up fit as a fiddle. That accident smashed up your morale a little worse than it did your shoulder. But we can't bandage up your state of mind, too. But you just said it. Will power. Now, little alabaster saint, you, will yourself to lift that left arm the way I tell you, or I'm going to hunt up that big handsome pirate beau of yours and tell him to go find himself another dancing partner. That will hold her for a while, what do you say, Miss MacAfee?"

Oh, but Dr. Riley was a tonic in himself. So big. So breezy. So gentle under all his manner of gale and rumpus. He had set your shoulder when the first two doctors had bungled it. So skillfully. So mercifully. You laughed up at him from the little nest of you down under the covers.

"Albaster saint," he boomed, "lift that left arm and put that piece of hair behind that piece of ear!" And, laughing, you did it!

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The will. You knew that, of course. But it was the mustering up of the will to will. So much to get well for — so much — and yet — that will to will. It wouldn't muster. It was like trying to lift off your chest a tonnage of iron weights under which your frail breastbone strained, but mysteriously did not crash. That tonnage of iron weights — Sometimes, during the long watches of the nights, with Miss MacAfee asleep on the chaise longue, and the light burning like a tired eye, sometimes the pressure could almost seem to stop your breathing.

Hail Marys helped. To hold your breath three consecutive times until you counted nine sometimes made you drowsy. It took hundreds and hundreds of sheep over the stile to make you even doze, but more usually it only succeeded in making your eyes feel gritty.

You wondered if you were having a nervous breakdown. Anna Belle Smith, one of the girls at the convent, had had a nervous breakdown. You had all been enormously curious about it, but no one knew quite what ailed her, except that one of the girls had it authentically that Anna cried all the time and wouldn't go down for meals.

You did not feel like crying — quite — except that your throat hurt most of the time. Ached as if holding itself tense against something. Tears? You wondered.

You did not talk about it even to Dr. Riley, or to Dr. Divine, who took your blood pressure and fiddled around with blood tests. But the nights could be pretty bad. So long. So interminable that your cheeks gathered fever as if they were steel disks and your arm in its cast buzzed of imprisonment.

Not for the world would you have disturbed Miss MacAfee, who was pretty and red-haired and slept with her cheek in her palm and her red lashes the merest curve along her cheeks.

Sometimes lying there watching her at night, it was silly you knew, but something pulled at the very heart of you.

That anything could be so tender as those lashes in their long pause against her sleep. They made her seem sprinkled with the strangest, most poignant pollen.

Awake, Miss MacAfee was full of the lurid and clinical gossip of the trained nurse, and metallic with a super kind of sophistication regarding men. Sometimes when she looked at Dudley, everything about her face could seem to point up. Her mouth. The corners of her eyes. Her appealingly pretty pretty retroussé nose. She became a little satyress.

Most of all, the Max helped the long nights through. You swam to sleep on Its radiance. You kissed your well hand passionately into the palm and then held it out to your Beloved all wet with your tears. The Max that was more of a light in the room than the lamp beside your bed.

You wanted sometimes to cast off your covers. To plunge into something that was coarse enough to hurt your flesh, as those eyes had been hurt. Something coarse against you. Coarse as — coarse as — sacking! The sackings that Kate wore around her loins when she scrubbed the kitchen floor. Coarseness of sacking! That was it. You, lying there in your nest of linen. Sacking. Sacking. Sackcloth. . . .

*

Nobody in the house was allowed to mention Frank's name. Father's dictum. Sometimes, sitting beside your bed, Mother's poor dry mouth would sort of open with the gasp of a fish on land, then close again and open so that you could see how long her teeth were, now that the gums had receded.

That was Mother's way of wanting to talk about Frank, her eyes looking at you above the gasping orifice of her mouth and her dry fingers always plucking at her skirts, or the bedspread, or a handkerchief. Mother's dryness. Mother's saplessness. Poor dearest Mother. Your eyes streamed sometimes at the very thought of her, the same something that made

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Frank, whose heart could break for her, irritable in his manner and nervous, made you that way too, so that you had to bite your lips in order not to cry out:

For goodness' sake, Mother, if you don't stop gasping at me that way I'll go mad! If you have anything to say, say it, dear, but don't gasp at me, Mother. Don't gasp!

But instead, you lay with your eyes closed most of the time Mother sat beside your bed, as if you were dozing, except that your toes kept wiggling and climbing over each other from nervousness.

Once when Father was having his vibratory massage and you could hear the electric machine humming, Mother's gasp said something.

"Laurie, you — you know about Frank, of course?"

"Of course, dear, they've written me almost every day, and those roses are from them."

"I haven't dared mention it, Laurie — you so weak — your father — so opposed — you don't feel too weak, Laurie, to talk?"

"No, dear — go on."

"You know, Laurie, how the news came the very night of the accident — it's a wonder I'm left here to tell it. The shock. The scare."

Poor Mother, your heart bled for her, and yet all you said was:

"But, Mother, there have been calamities as great as two young people who love each other going off and getting married."

"But, Laurie — she's a bad girl ——"

You remembered the look between the eyes of the lay sister with the two iron keys — it was from stooping to help lift the bad girls ——

"Mother!"

"Our Frank, Laurie, always above mere business, with his

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poetry and his plays, married now to a stenographer from the Yards and, shame of it, to a girl already in family-way."

Oh, oh, how could Mother have — have put it that way! It was just Mother's saying of it that made it offend so. The way that poor Mother's way of saying almost everything could somehow irritate. The idea of Stella Genesee, whose eyes you had seen that day in the hall when she kissed the sleeve of Frank's coat, stalking about in the bulbous, unfastidious fashion of women in tenement streets! Of course Stella was in that condition, but somehow Mother putting it that way. So discreetly. So — somehow so nastily. The lovely eyes of Stella Genesee that had swum so with light.

You lay and wriggled your toes and wanted to seem asleep.

"Your Father is so hard, Laurie. I've wanted to make the best of it. I kept saying to him those first weeks, before he refused to let us refer to it: 'Make the best of it, Regan. After all he's our son. Your only son,' I said to him; 'Regan, to forgive is God's way. And after all she's a girl in the Faith, Regan — or at least she was born to it. It might have been worse, what with Frankie's seeming to get farther and farther away from the Church. It might have been a girl all the way out of the Faith,' I kept telling him. . . ."

You could hear Mother keep saying that. Keep saying it until you could see Father's jaw lock up stubbornly against her.

"What worries me, Laurie, is how they'll make out. Don't tell your father I've been, but they live in a little flat up there near the gas tanks, with her mother. She's some kind of a seamstress, it seems. Common people, Laurie. It worries me how they'll make out. The girl's one of the mannish kind. Bangs and short hair and low heels. A spitfire one from the look of her. A newfangled, art-looking girl, with no fear of God in her and no love of her Church. And Frank's out of the business, you know, Daughter. Your Father had Hilton

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carry out his bags and his trunk on the doorstep like a dispossessed lodger. There have been lawyers all month. Drawing up papers. We none of us know what kind. Quin has been down twice from Albany. Thick as two peas, housed up with him. Doheny has charge of the Yards now. I can't bear it, Laurie, Frank gone. It's like somebody had walked out of the house and at the same time out of me. I'm empty, Laurie! I'm an empty house myself. . . ."

"But, Mother dear, if Frank and this girl are happy, how happy you should be too."

"I know it, Daughter. I *am* happy with my mind. But my heart won't stop breaking. What do you think I found him doing, Laurie, the evening that Fleta and I stole up there after Victor had your father in bed and asleep? Holding yarn for his mother-in-law to sort colors from, for some dress-making work she was doing! And the girl with her head against his knee, on the floor and reading to him from a book. If she gets him away from me, Laurie. That mother. She's one of those round kind of women that can mother a boy to death. Not just a dried-out old woman who clings — like I've been to him — to all my children ——"

"Oh, no" — poor darling jealous Mother — "no — no ——"

"I know, Laurie, how I've failed. Poor Fleta, too. Say a prayer for her every day, Laurie. She's failed too. Failed from having too much of me in her. The fault was mine, maybe. I let him tire me out with his being the stronger. Keep your beauty, Laurie. Don't let Dudley wear you down. Don't suffer the humiliation of — of — don't let him wear you down. He's a good boy, but no better than the run of them. Keep your beauty, Laurie. Don't let it destroy you. The way it did me. The way it did Fleta. Pray for Fleta — Laurie ——"

"Mother, I do. I do."

"Don't have more children than your health will stand.

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It is as wrong to them as it is to you. I've seen my life go down, Daughter, like one of those toy balloons when you stick a pin in it."

As if you didn't know. . . .

"Don't you, Laurie. That's why, Daughter, sometimes I haven't been so happy over you and Dudley as I might; it isn't that he is anything but a fine good boy that you are giving yourself up to, Laurie, but he's a man and you must be wise enough to keep him by keeping yourself fit for him to love."

As Mother had not! Mother, who had had to share — so — humiliatingly! That specter of family in Long Island City that kept Mother's eyes looking haunted.

"You've always been a peculiar young one, Daughter. Never much of a child for beaux, like I was in my day. Like Fleta was. Keep Dudley for your very own, Laurie. Don't let him pull down your youth and your beauty and then, after you have given it to him — lose him ——"

I won't, Mother, I won't — you cried deep down in your silence.

"Don't find yourself on the dust heap — the way Fleta did, Daughter. The way your Mother did ——"

Mother talking to you like this. In all the years that you had seen the wraith of her dim she had never seemed so near. Near enough now to hurt that little place in your heart that Father hurt so. That very private little place that was more intuition than understanding. Your hand that was so inert, reaching out, full of its strange sense of that zeal for service.

"Why, Mother — dearest ——"

"Keep yourself a bride, Laurie. Always. Perpetually."

Mother's little ooze of tears. Why, Mother was too dry for tears. Mother was too arid for tears. Too dusty. They came so slowly and scarcely seeming wet. You knew the feel of the little quiver around Mother's pretty nose, because you

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felt that same quiver when you were near to tears. Your own nose was so like Mother's. Mother's little nose that was still pretty, projecting with the same new little new-moon clarity of your own. The cracked, baked-looking plateau of face around it had made you not notice before now, the identical prettiness of yours and Mother's nose. Why, there you were. In Mother. Sitting there beside yourself in a black silk dress with an Irish lace collar held by a brooch of Fleta when she too was lovely as you were lovely.

There you were. In Mother. Mother who had given of herself so selflessly that there might be you and Frank and Fleta. It was sublime to give like that. But only if you loved and were loved. But not the way of Mother and Father and Quin and Fleta. That was what frightened you. Not their way.

You knew somehow, with a hurting vagueness, the beauty that had its dwelling place in the earthly love of men and women. It had even flitted across your own lips. You knew with the thrill of shudder that could run over you sometimes when Dudley kissed your eyes. You knew the beauty in fugitive flashes.

There was a stanza in one of Frank's books that had got itself caught in your mind:

Oh, love! Once he drew
With one long kiss my whole soul through
My lips, as sunlight drinketh dew.

It was sublime if you loved that way. As sublime as being loved that way. You knew it from the fugitive, the all-too-fugitive flashes . . . languid adolescence. . . .

But to be that way — languidly adolescent — was not to be wastage. God's scheme was that some of His children walk in virginity to Him.

There was something too precious in even the thought. It

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made you tremble. Frank said that God's scheme was only another way of saying evolu——

But there you were again, making the back of your neck ache. God made special kinds of persons for His special reasons — you were your own special kind of person — one didn't bother to tag oneself with the scientific, clinical, psychoanalytical phraseology that littered Frank's books and Frank's head — it was sweeter to lie and think that you were one of God's special little schemes — saved apart ——

Keep yourself a bride — always — Laurie — perpetually. Perpetually.

You thought of one particular bride who had grown old so beautifully and so securely and so sublimely. Not the way of Fleta and Mother and — perhaps you, with Dudley.

Mother Agatha, with her firm shining face that was like a lily pad.

But of course you weren't talking about that particular kind of bride. But about you. Laura Regan.

You knew the candles that Mother must be burning for you. When it was you should be burning them for Mother. To think of her having fluttered there beside your bed like a little hurt bird. Opening again and again her poor dried lips to try to say things that were as difficult to say as if her mouth had been a wound. When it was you — you all these years — should have been burning the candles for Mother.

You leaned over to stroke her face with your free hand. You wanted to help her up from out of the crouch of herself. You wanted to gather her up, to encompass her with this pity of yours.

This pity of yours which was wider, somehow, than even your love for Dudley.

One afternoon, entirely without premeditation even as the words hopped off your lips, so that you were electrified at

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their temerity, you said to Father, seated there beside your bed:

"Father, I want to see Frank."

Even Miss MacAfee unpacking roses from Dudley, paused in lifting the tissue paper.

Father's profile stopped. He had been going to put his pipe between his lips and his hand just stayed and his pipe just hung. Father, who had forbidden Frank to be mentioned, caught that way in a pause over which he seemed to have no control.

"Father!" you cried, and were frightened.

Actually he could scarcely get his pipe to his lips because his hand trembled. You wanted to help him but you could not and besides, not even you would have dared that.

Sometimes for fifteen minutes Father would struggle with that dead left wing of himself to raise his foot from the floor to a stool, but let anyone, Miss MacAfee or Victor or Mother or his masseuse, so much as dare acknowledge his difficulty by coming forward with assistance!

You wanted somehow to raise yourself to help Father out of that dreadful involuntary pause of his, but there he sat locked, for the interminable seconds, and all you could do was to let clatter on, the words that were frightening you.

"You see, Father, I haven't seen Frank — since — I know, dear, how hurt and angry you are, but Frank and Stella love each other and are happy. You can't determine a man's right to his happiness, — Father. Frank's a man. He had to settle that for himself."

Father struggling on with the dead-wing side of him. You had somehow to talk. To talk on. To clatter into the silence. You were frightened and so you talked faster and bolder.

"Just being a parent, Father, doesn't give a man a mortgage on his children's souls! You cannot demand definite qualities in Frank, just because he happens to be your son, any more

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than you can demand that his eyes be black instead of blue, just because you happen to prefer black."

The silence. The silence.

"Being a father can be sublime, but it isn't being divine."

The snow-white, stunned silhouette of Miss MacAfee over Dudley's roses. Father with the words seeming to want fairly to leap aboard his lips and the tardy nerve centers that would not obey. Then one instant more of the silence and Father's lips began to move. It was like having to hurry to muster all your forces in time to empty your gun of its last shot into the silence.

"After all, Father, being a parent isn't being God."

There! Even the silhouette of Miss MacAfee drooping as if she could hold her breath no longer, Father finding his speech finally in clumps, and the great heavy thrust of his jaw swinging up slowly, as if to bellow.

Damn him for a bum!

Father!

"He's a good-for-nawthing bum. He's fought me iviry inch of the way of the life I helped to put into him. He's been a girl-boy whin if ever a man wanted a he-man with fight in him, to take up where his father left off, that man has bin me. And what's he done? He's shamed me iviry inch of the way, belittling the work of a lifetime. A work that I hoped to pass on to my son. He's made what I built up for him something to be stooped to, instead of something fit for a prince to inherit. Shamed me. And now shamed me to the gizzard, having to marry with another good-for-nawthing that's already carrying his child. I'd have broken his neck if he hadn't married her, but it has broken me heart that he has."

"Father, poor Father."

"He's fought me, that boy, iviry inch, like being his father

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was being his enemy. Being a father is not being God? If ever a father knew he was not God with his son, that father has been me. Me, God? Dirt, rather, under his feet!"

"No, no, Father — Frank's always been so afraid of you ——"

"Afraid? Afraid of me? It's me, you're meaning, has been afraid of me son. Afraid if I didn't hold him down tight under me heel, he'd shame me for being the ignoramus I am. And how have I kept the ignoramus I am? Slaving me hands to the bone since the day I landed in America fifty years ago, so that some day me boy would have the fine education and the larnin' to shame me with. It's with me own hands I've built up a machine to destroy me. That's what some of his smart ones would call irony for you. Toiling me hands to the bone so me own son could have larnin' enough to shame me for bein' a toiler ——"

"Why, Father, Father dear, Frank's never thought of you that way. Frank's always thought that you were the one contemptuous of him for having none of your splendid qualities for success in business. Hasn't it ever occurred to you, Father, how it must feel for a dreamer like Frank to feel himself the son of a self-made, enormously successful man like you? Don't you think that Frank realizes how they compare his inefficiency at the Yards with your power? . . .

"Is it inny worse than I know they're a-saying of me that me son is too good for me? The daffy-down-dilly son of a roughneck father."

You hadn't thought of it just that way before, and you lay and regarded Father with his bitter lower jaw that hung like a nose bag and his hands that were the shape of wet chamois gloves on a clothesline. Father feeling gauche every time Frank entered a room. Father lording it so over Frank at the Yards for fear of his daffy-down-dilly son. Father berating Frank at breakfast for fear — for fear of the superiority he had

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bought for Frank and paid for. Paid for with the hands that were the shape of wet chamois gloves on a clothesline.

First Mother and then Father talking to you like this. It must be, that lying there helpless on your back was binding you with new closeness. The very idea of Father talking to you as if you were more than something sweet that had dared to skittle about his knee that no one else had dared skittle about — Father talking to you like this. . . .

Father, you think Frank thinks you're the roughneck father of a daffy-down-dilly son, and Frank thinks you're the successful father of a daydreaming failure of a son. It's just that you two — you and your own son, Father — haven't really ever met. . . .

Oh, the bitter simian thrust to Father's face. You had seen him sit hours that way with just that droop of lip and now again Father's clumps of words trying to leap aboard his lips that he could not force apart in time and you jumping in for dread of the silence.

Father, I want to see Frank. I do, dear — dreadfully — please.

It was because you were weak, of course, that every little thing made you want to cry, but lying there your throat became taut with wanting to see Frank and from seeing Father whose lips hung there bitterly mute and mutely bitter.

Father, dear, don't say no. I'll have him come late some evening after you have gone to bed. And alone. Father, you too — don't you want to see Frank?

The stumping of Father's cane. "No. No."

Victor came in then, and there was the ado of getting Father to his feet. Poor Father, Victor finally succeeding in hoisting him and letting him totter there for a moment to get his bearings. A great oak that had been struck by lightning.

Poor Father. You could hear him clump-clump out and

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you lay with the pity streaming into two hot little splotches onto the pillow.

Toward dusk Victor came up and stood and stood beside your bed until, conscious of a presence, you opened your eyes. He was Alsatian, and spoke with an inflection that was new and amusing to you.

"Your father, Miss, he says to tell you 'yes.' Some night after he has gone to bed. You will understand, he says."

You understood. Poor Father, with the mutely bitter and the bitterly mute lips.

The night that Frank came, Father's vibratory machine had been quiet for an hour and the lower hall was dark, so that when he let himself in with his key, he had to grope until he reached the second floor where the light from your door flowed down.

It was the first time you had seen Frank now in the fifteen weeks since that spring-washed day you and he and Stella Genesee had sat tense in the three-cornered group with the flow of new turf around you.

You knew it wasn't anything to cry about and yet when Frank walked in with his cap in the dear old fashion under his arm and his soft collar revealing the nervous beat of the two veins in his neck, and his lightning-like profile flashing, you did cry and lift your good arm about his shoulder and keep your face there while Miss MacAfee, in her rubber heels, drew up a chair beside the bed and stole out.

Laurie, I'd have been here before if the old gentleman hadn't made it so damn hard.

You knew. You felt the recoil even now all along Frank's flesh at being there. Frank's bag and trunks . . . out on the front stoop. With your face up against his coat you could see them there in two black blurs and feel them too, like the lumps of sobs in your heart.

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And then Frank did the one saving thing that made you giggle.

"Lord," he said, "you smell like Herod's harem," and put you back down on the bed and began grimacing "is Dudley still soaking you in Herodian sin?"

Dudley had a favorite perfume for you which he sent in the loveliest icicle-shaped flasks. It exhaled, after you had daubed it on behind your ears, like the slow breath of an agynian tripod. There were spices and incense and sandalwood and frangipane in it and the wee languor of a flower that eluded identification.

Frank always said you left the smell of it around the house like a trail of a wounded shark.

"Well, it's my perfume, isn't it?" you retorted in the lingo of spatting with Frank.

"Yes, Allah be praised, it's none of moine, Mrs. Flaharaty. And how's the hurt wing, me gir-r-rul?"

"Oh, Frankie, it's easy enough to laugh. . . ."

"I'm not laughing, Laurie, you know that. I've been through it all, right with you. Gad, it must have been a spill. But, Laurie, you look like a little peach lying there in plenty of cream. No wonder poor Dudley lost his head and steered you into a ditch."

"He didn't, Frank. It was the gear broke. But you — you look so splendid. So different. Frankie — the little purple oyster shells under your eyes are gone! It makes you look so — so — Frankie, you look splendid!"

"Do I, Laurie? Well, then, it's because I'm something I have never been in my life before. What do you think I am, Laurie?"

"Frank, I strongly suspect you of being — happy!"

"Well said, my girl, and to the point."

"You're so happy, Frank — why, you're all spoiled — you don't look like Shelley any more. Frankie, I can't bear it. You're growing commonplace. You're growing *fat*."

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"Man alive," cried Frank, thrown into immediate and violent heroics, and slapping his forehead and his pockets as if he had lost something. "Not that! Anything but that, Ermangarde! Not — fat! Not t-t-that! Oh, God — not that. Not fat!"

Oh. Oh, but it was fun. Frank in one of his old nonsense moods, smacking his brow, and striking his old burlesque attitude of melancholy Dane, with his eyes rolling terribly under the jut of brow, and his left leg thrown out at the angle of doublet and hose.

It hurt you clear up under the cast the way you laughed, and sillily enough, when there was so much of moment that you had to say to Frank, it set you to remembering little old irrelevant things.

Frank, remember the night Kate broke Father's tobacco jar and I began to meow like a tabby so Father wouldn't suspect who did it?

Oh. Oh. Oh. Did Frank remember! If the two sillies of you didn't gasp with laughter that made you red in the face.

"And, Laurie, remember the time old Father Bruno came to dinner and razzed me for reading sissy books when he found me curled up in the chair with *The Doll's House*!"

Oh, oh — poor old Father Bruno. Maybe he didn't know his Ibsen, but in his own way he knew the same things that made Ibsen wise. And, Frank, do you remember the time we ——

Just a minute, Laurie — remember the time Ashfurth Ropps went ice skating with us and you landed with him in a pool and while you were fishing each other out, I plopped in too.

You did remember Ashfurth Ropps. He had pulled you out so surely with his long magnetic hands. . . .

And, oh Lord — here's a good one! Will I ever forget it? — remember the time you had us all sitting in a row at your first communion and the little kid in front of you began vio-

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lently to lose her panties and you sprang to the rescue with a safety pin? And remember the time you had Fleta and Mother building wimples for you out of antiseptic hospital gauze for the convent production of my famous opus *Nun among the Lilies* and I came into the house and —

Did you remember? *Nun among the Lilies*! Something in you could ring like a little vesper right through the merri-ment. *Nun among the Lilies*. You in the white serge shawl that Mother Agatha had loaned you. You hadn't dared tell Frank for years that for you, still, somehow, some way, *Nun among the Lilies* was like walking down an aisle to Him. You could still feel the little-girl way about it that made Frank call you dumb-bell.

Of course you were just that, Dumb-bell. Compared to Frank and Stella Genesee, who had studied law at night school and taken extension college courses for business girls. Sometimes it seemed to you that you thought only with your emotions. Felt things. And so of course because you were half ashamed, you laughed with Frank at *Nun among the Lilies*, but with the little ringing of vespers against you just the same.

"And now, Frankie — tell me — just everything —"

"Well, don't know that there is so much to tell, Laurie, except — except —"

"Except what?"

"Except everything."

"You and Stella?"

"There's nothing much to be said about Stella and me that hasn't already been sung in those tenor solos that hold up the action of a perfectly good musical show. I — we — but I *am* happy, Laurie. I never in my life felt more ridiculous than I do standing here saying it, but it's the God awful truth. I'm afraid we're happy."

It was like trying not to breathe, to continue to lie there

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with your heart bulging out against you and having to keep yourself so neatly within the radius of being casual.

"And Stella?"

"Laurie, whenever I think of that day in the park, when at the drop of the hat I would have been ready to throw it all over — I want to get down on all fours and crawl before her like the worm I am. You knew I was hedging, didn't you, Laurie? You had to hold me pretty tight by the scruff of my fool neck. I wanted to hedge that day. Not away from Stella. But a sudden and nauseous reaction of wanting to run away from everything. The mess I'd made. But you . . . there is something Stella and I can't ever forget about you that day, Laurie. It wasn't what you said or did. It was almost — almost as if you were cursed with being able to see everybody's point of view enough to feel pain for us all. Mother, Father, me, Stella. I was hedging. I wasn't going to see it through. I was sick. I wanted to chuck Stella — to chuck life — scared — coward — but you ——"

"No — no — Frankie — I wasn't any of those things. I didn't want it either. I wanted you to run away from it too. It was terrible to me. You — her — on the corner that way. I didn't want it. I've been as ashamed as you are since. Oh, how I wanted to find a way out — from her — from it — only then — all of a sudden, Frank, I pitied her so. So terribly. More than you, Mother, Father. More than anybody. Pity. I'm a dumb-bell, Frank. It's just pity in me. Sometimes, Frank — even when I'm dumbest about things, I — I think I have more pity in me than anybody in the world ——"

"I think maybe you have too, Laurie. Little Madonna."

"Frank!"

"Take it back and hope to choke."

"It's just that it jams everything else out of me, Frank. The pity. Aren't there people in the world, Frank, who must be made that way; people who can pity more than — more

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even than they can love? That kind of pity, Frank, *is* love — isn't it?"

"The love of the blown-in-the-glass, dyed-in-the-wool ascetic! Darling little fool, you. That's what you're precious near to, if you don't watch out, and God help Dudley."

"Frank, I am serious. God must mean to have that kind of love in the world — my kind — as well as the other."

"Laurie, how long ago did you promise me to swear off talking to me about — God?"

"I loved Stella that way, Frank, that day in the park. With my pity. More than I loved you. More than anything in the world. More than you, me, Mother, Father — and Dud!"

There, you had said it! And Dud! And just in the very saying, with the word out of your mouth like a cork from a popgun, you half expected the room to split in thunder and the spear of white lightning to hurl through the silence, the way it had done in the Passion play you had seen in New Mexico, the summer Father had taken you on the trip to the Coast.

And Dud!

But the light from under the pink chiffon lamp shade never so much as flickered and the silence stayed warm, and Frank's head with your hand in the warm mesh of his hair never stirred.

"Laurie, you little nun, you — as Stella says, there's something luminous about you. Hang it, you're all dripping over with Light, whatever that means."

"Frankie, stop spoofing."

"Stella seems to understand you, Laurie, better than any of us have in all these years of watching your little funninesses. The girl is uncanny at reading human nature. I want you to know her better. You think she is just a clever girl with an original quirk of mind, don't you? Self-educated, intellectual curiosity, and all that. Well, she is more than just that. She

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has the practical mind of a man and the most unsuspected flashes in her make-up. She's the sort of girl is expert on a double-entry system of bookkeeping and reads Adonais during lunch hour. That's how I first came to notice her. But that's the least, Laurie. It's her pluck! It's Stella's debonaire attitude about life. She's gay about it. She won't fight with anything but gayety. Look at her now. She's taken another job. Some law firm in Nassau Street. Horses couldn't hold her. And evenings, after her job all day — she works with me. Prods me. Helps me. That's Stella, on the eve of having a youngster."

That's Stella. You needed only to look in his face.

"I think we've the heredity play placed, Laurie. Stella had an idea for the second act — and I rewrote it. You remember *Morals of Conrad*? The one you used to say made the back of your neck ache? No wonder. It was dull. Stella found out why. The love interest all buried underneath an idea. She's a wonder for helping to humanize an idea. Puts flesh and blood into it. We've rewritten two of my short stories, and sold them. And you'll never guess where. To the *National Weekly*. I tell you she's a wonder for humanizing an idea. For humanizing me. That's why we sent back your two wedding-present checks, old thing. Thanks. We're on velvet. Cut panne velvet — Stella on a salary and me with the work I've planned — and that little Harlem flat up there with her mother carrying on the household part, is a castle-on-the-subway. My favorite nightmare is that I am back — here — at the Yards — Laurie — how's Mother?"

The curious glazed look of Frank when he raised his head to look at you then. The look of the clinging burs — that look of his flesh shuddering as if to shake them off.

"You know, Frank, how Mother must look without you. Sometimes to me she looks like I imagine a drowned person must look when she is floating face up ——"

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"Laurie, for God's sake ——"

"You know what I mean. Mother's always been like that — a little lost ——"

"I do know — I do know. And Father ——?"

"He — Father'll never be the one even to so much as whimper it — he might want to terribly — but the something in his make-up — the terribleness and stubbornness won't let him, Frankie; it's as if he had a fox under his coat letting it eat and eat into him — but if you and Stella, now that it's all over — would you — could you — come home? Father — Mother — Frankie, oh, would you ——"

The stark white fixing of Frank's face. As if someone had closed a door. As if someone had drawn a blind. You thought you had never really known the Frank who had suffered all his boyhood until that look came and locked there.

"I'll break rock first. I'll let her tie her papoose to her back and go and chop wood. Stella's free. She's helping me to get free. I've never known how deeply in hell I was all those years until now. It's like having lived all my life with a thorn festering in me and until someone came along and yanked it out, I never realized how horrible the pain was. Good God, Laurie, because you are sorry for Mother and Father, would you throw out three lives ——"

"I only meant, Frankie — poor Mother, she ——"

"Is that why you asked me to come here to-night?"

"Frankie, no, no. I know you're right — I don't really want it — I ——"

"This house — Father's been like a — a something from the jungle stalking through it — crushing — and we are the pulp — Mother — Fleta —— You're marrying out of it — I'm out from under and I intend to stay out from under, me and mine."

"You're right, Frankie, only — only ——" Mother with no more tears to shed. Father sitting there like a ruin. It was as if you were trying to run toward them with your hands

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held out, but all at once when you looked down, instead of bearing them gifts, your hands were empty.

"Frankie," you said almost to yourself, because you were so tired, "if only there was a way to help — everybody."

"You're a funny kid," said Frank, and leaned over to kiss you before he tiptoed down to let himself, like a thief, out of Father's house.

The night was one of those that could seem the longest, even though, after Frank left, Miss MacAfee bathed you in warm water and made you so drowsy that it seemed you would never get to sleep fast enough. And then, of course, once you were all tucked in and ready and the light low and Miss MacAfee stretched out on her chaise longue, open spun your eyes into the two hot disks.

The long night. The hot night. The night irked with too much cover. Frank and Stella. Stella who could make a man's face shine like that! Stella and Frank. You were ashamed of the impulse of even wanting to bring them home — here — and yet if only there were a way to help. Father would be asking you with his dreadful silence — and with his eyes that were as broody as the windows of an old ruin. Mother who wanted Stella's baby. . . . The tear that ran down and trickled, but it was hard to wipe it away even with the well hand. You simply could not lift it and so you let the tear that ran, trickle along your cheek and sting.

I am getting sleepy, I am getting sleepy. I must get sleepy. One, two — three — four-five-six — the chewing of the flame along your side — seven-seven — Fleta — no, no, eight-nine-ten — Fleta — I am getting sleepy — sleepy — poor Fleta — the unspeakably tender curve to the lashes against Miss MacAfee's cheek. Tender thing. What was there about those lashes as they lay against her sleep that made the preciousness of what you felt for her almost a hurt?

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By day, dear knows, she was a common everyday enough little person, with a snide way of wanting to get Mother or Kate to carry up all the trays. But by night you could feel a little guardianship of her — and up over you both, behind the glass dish of the pansies — Beloved, with the thorn-pierced eyes.

Jesus, Savior of my soul, send me to sleep. Beloved — help me to help — everybody. There had been lint and a long white thread on Frank's coat sleeve. There must be lint all over the flat in Harlem. Seamstresses' flats were full of lint. Frank's face — Stella who could make a man's face to shine like that — one-two-three — four — five — I'm getting sleepy — please, Beloved — I must get sleepy — you little nun, you — Frank had said — You little nun —

*

To-day the cast was coming off. Dudley's face. It had the look of a small boy in the act of tossing up his cap.

One evening, just for fun, with Mary and Jerry and Dudley about, Mary had unwrapped the wedding veil from its box and stood it at the foot of your bed where the sheer thing stood up of frail crispness. You could have walked into the waiting bower of it and let the silver blossom bandeau descend around your brow in a fillet. There stood your own bridal sheaf at the foot of your bed, waiting for you to inhabit it with your heartbeat. That was it. The heartbeat, that somehow was still on the outside of it.

"Dudley!" you cried, stricken for him as he stood there in his boyish fashion beside the bed. "Oh — poor old Dud —"

He had taken off his coat because the heat was beginning to crowd even into the cool of your own room that was all arrayed in new cretonne covers, and his white silk shirt clung a little damply to his bigness and he kept hitching at his

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white flannel trousers and looking from you to your bridal shell at the foot of the bed for all the world as if his eyes were magnets that wanted to lift you right into the bower of veil that stood waiting for you. You. Laura Regan. Dudley's bride.

"Dudley," you cried, aching for him, for the boy in him that made him stand there so frankly, so boyishly investing that veil with you. His you! The you that must presently crowd up that bower with heartbeat.

"Oh, Laurie," said Dudley, and bent down and kissed you, and kissed you. "Hurry up, Laurie, and get well. They'll have the damn harness off you and then by the tenth — by the tenth! I want to smother you in all the white orchids in the world. I want to knock them silly when you walk down that aisle with me. Mine. I'll show the world. . . ."

Positively Mary's little tongue was just like an adder. It raced around the pink bowl of her lips. It was like her, sitting over there on a gay little cretonne chair, curled so that one bare knee peered out above her rolled stocking, and between the cigarette smoke which she sent toward the ceiling in rings, to dart out:

"Why don't you rent some display space for her, Dud, and invite your friend, the world, to come and gape?"

"I hadn't thought of that," said Dudley, and kissed you again and again and again, shamelessly there before Mary and Jerry who was sitting with his lips pursed out, wrapping cigarettes from his pouch for Mary's tortoise-shell case.

Dudley and Jerry had turned over forty-eight thousand on a bull sugar market that summer. There was an excitement about them.

Mary with her new canary diamond solitaire and her little adder dart of a tongue. But how good she had been to you. Jerry too, with his humorous curious fashion of sitting at a great slant in a chair, eyes half closed, lower jaw pursed and hands clasped up behind his head.

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Their weekly journey in from their country place at Ingle-side, Long Island, for hours at your bedside, was part of their contrition. The contrition that could bore you. As if it had been anybody's particular fault. Jerry's hip flask or Dudley's recklessness. Sometimes Mary, spending hours beside your bed, could make your eyelids burn like fire. Mary's pert talk of the hour. It was as if she bit into the coin of each day to make sure no counterfeits were being palmed off on her. Being Mary was in a way being the relentless opposite of Fleta and Mother. Mary had decided to have two children, no more. Mary had decided for her own little lynx-eyed self that the women she termed "keepies" were the only really adored ones and that it was a wise women who demanded that her husband treat her with the same grand manner he would his mistress. Mary demanded a Park Avenue apartment, a sedan like a jewel case, a lavish checking account and that Jerry carry in her lacquered breakfast tray every morning and sit on the edge of the bed while she sipped her coffee.

Mary's little neat-lipped, level-eyed, cocksure way of achieving just the opposite of Mother, who was like the drained-out bean bag, and of Fleta, who had been worn crooked, like the old shoe, and cast aside. Often, lying there listening to Mary and seeing her lips come down in that bite of theirs, you wondered.

How frightening it was to see the struggle. Mary, Mother, Fleta. Each in her way. The certain terribleness of Mary. The terrible meekness of Mother. What must He be thinking, there above the pansies? Was that why His eyes were thorn-bitten? In quandary over what they had created — what must He be thinking — in His pity that was born out of love and His love that was born out of pity? . . .

Sometimes, listening to Mary's brittle patter, you felt some of that love and pity well up in you. For Mary, of all people. For Mary who did not seem to need it. Mary who was so

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young and so cocksure. So cool of flesh and firm of lip and of eye. The pity born out of love. Yes, even for Mary with her firm young teeth pouncing on everything that life offered her. For fear — for ugly fear, it might be counterfeit.

The warm summer evenings there about your bed. Mother tiptoeing and drifting off about nine o'clock, quite unmissed, to bed. Father's vibratory machine whirring and finally ceasing. Miss MacAfee coming in from the recreation period she took every evening. Mary, who would so have preferred to dance, wound there into her coil on the cretonne chair, watching the smoke rings and, for the most part of the time, planning hers and Jerry's contemplated trip to Europe. Jerry, slanting in his chair and tinkling the ice in his ginger ale to which he added plentifully from the flask on his hip. Dudley standing around moist and hot-looking, his lips apart like a boy's regarding your bridal shell there at the foot of the bed waiting for you to inhabit it with your heartbeat.

The bridal veil standing there in the fashion that made you think of doves in descent, showing the underside of their wings.

You, Laura Regan, the Bride.

Hurry and get well, Laurie. We'll show the world!

When Dr. Riley began picking off the cast you were set up in bed with a support of pillows around you and you had not realized how wrapped you must have been, until he and Miss MacAfee began to unwind.

You grinned at yourself in the cheval, through the whirlwind of gauze. Lovely little eclipse of that head of yours shining at you like a gilt little egg. It was so long since you had seen it that way, sitting upright. Nice Miss MacAfee to have wound the braids so right. Mary's pretty brown hair was bobbed and looked in the back like a chrysanthemum that began tenderly but then rushed up furiously into a mop. It

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made her piquant as the flirt of the French maid's feather duster.

You would have bobbed yours too, except that the way the girls were doing it made it flare so. Once, at convent, through a flash of door that a gale blew open, you and Mary had caught a fleeting glimpse of Sister Celia with her wimple off. Shorn. For days the rapid little tongue of Mary had clicked like a knitting needle. If you were a nun, you were shorn like a lamb, not just prettily bobbed. You had a prickly head. Oh, it was — horrible. To Mary.

But strangely there was something about the tight coils of your hair, something about the sweet warm bind of them made them seem snug — snug as a wimple. . . .

Snip. Snip. Snip. Why, the cast was half off! Dropping around in chunks. Loose plaster of paris that crumpled off and out came a knob of your shoulder from the gauze.

"Well, my little lady, here's this left wing of yours back good as new. I've felt pretty certain of it all along but nothing like being certain beyond a doubt. There — bend — good — so!"

So there *had* been doubt! You realized now, by the quick surge of relief, how much of it must have lain in your own heart. No wonder Mother and Dudley were sitting out on the top of the stairs waiting so silently that it almost seemed to you that you could hear them breathe through the door. The unwrapping and the funny shriveled feel to your arm as it lay crinkled against your side. The crinkles made it look as if it had been immersed in water for a long, long time —

"There! Bend! Fine! Great. Again. The small shears, Miss MacAfee. Ah! No, raise again. Slowly. A little higher. A leetle — leetle higher. Yes, you can. Now around. Slowly as if you were flagging a train. Splendid. Again! Now, one, two, three!"

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Why, your arms were the free things they had always been. If only they were not so tired. So without desire. One, two, three! You couldn't raise them the once more. No, no. Not even once.

Mother and Dudley were sitting out there on the steps and that crushed left wing was free to be blithe again, and now you couldn't any more. You were so tired. So without the desire to be blithe. There was something insidious about your pillow, as you drifted back against it. You wanted to feel it billow about you and smother you back to sleep. Softly, but with the hurry of falling snow. You were so tired. So without desire. And the pillow — the pillow — rushing eagerly into all the little crannies of your neck.

"Come, come, child. Your shoulder is as well as mine. Come. Up!"

You knew your shoulder was well. But to be so without desire. That was what made you so tired. You tried to be lithe and to lift yourself again.

"There's a girl. Now! One, two, three. . . ."

No use. The blessed little sucking rush of the pillow around your ears. White silence of snow was all you could think of. Lovely oblivion of soft silent snow.

But Mother out there on the top stair, waiting, Mother and Dudley and Father who must be anxious. . . .

It was no use. It simply would not lift again, that crushed wing of your arm which was well now — but which had the look of having lain so long in water . . . or was it snow . . . ?

"Tired out?" said Dr. Riley. "Well, then, we'll call it a day. Not bad at that. A night's sleep will fix her. A little codeine if she needs it, Miss MacAfee, and I'll drop around in the morning. She's tired out, that's all."

Tired. You wondered as you lay there secure against the sweetness of the pillow, if yours was the dreaded kind of tiredness that creeps up on travelers fighting blizzard. . . .

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There was the sun in a great big stain across the foot of your bed. Sitting in it, patting you awake was Miss MacAfee, and Dr. Riley standing by, and the little huddle of Mother too, and down in the asphalt pocket of back yard someone was spanking a rug.

"Well, young lady, fourteen hours of unbroken sleep! How is 'Up and Doing' for to-day's slogan? Slide her into that pink thingabob, Miss MacAfee, we're going for a walk."

Of course. Of course. How deeply you had slept. Down in the snow — lovely smothered little death — all night the flakes had done their quiet burial of you. White crush. Snow hush. Cold white frozen fog. Of Tiredness. Opiate of fog.

And here it was morning. The splash of sunlight across your bed and there across the chair, the pink peignoir, pretty thing, that Mary made for you.

"Good morning, everybody," you said, and smiled; "Good morning, Daughter," said the huddle of Mother, and kissed you. "Good morning," said Kate with the sore-throat rag around her neck, looking up from all fours where she was swabbing along the edge of the rug. Good morning. Good morning. Good morning. Good morning everywhere. Good morning to the Max. The Max head that was like a light.

The pink peignoir fastened with a rosette of violet tulle. Mary had made it so saucily. A flare of violet that the pink gleamed through. You let Miss MacAfee slide you into it, and suddenly, with a twist, Dr. Riley had you on the edge of the bed so that your feet dangled and one, two, Miss MacAfee had your pink satin mules on them, also with the twinkle of violet rosette, and then you were slid forward like a canoe off its dock — out — out into the very middle of the ocean. The ocean of white fur rug before the cheval mirror. You reached for Dr. Riley and he side-stepped you — smiling — Miss MacAfee — Mother — all off there — beyond you — smiling. You started to wobble — to fall into the huddle of your fear —

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"I can't! No! Somebody ——"

"Go to her, Doctor, she'll fall ——"

"Nonsense, Mother Regan. Your daughter can stand as well as I can. Come now, young lady, take a couple of turns about the room and then get into your clothes and go down and have breakfast. There's a young gentleman friend of yours coming this afternoon to take you for a drive through the park. Come, a couple of turns."

A couple of turns. You stood in the trance that was all that kept you from wobbling and toppling, your eyes fastened on your reflection in the cheval glass. "A couple of turns!"

"Come. No, Miss MacAfee, don't help. Laura can help herself. Come now, right foot, left foot."

Right foot. Left foot. Of course. That was the way one walked. The trance of yourself. You would have liked to shake yourself, like a spaniel, free of the trance. Right foot, left foot.

"Doctor — help her ——"

"Please, Mother Regan, don't interfere. Laurie can walk! Laurie is going to walk. Come. Here I am, just three steps away. You cannot possibly fall unless you land in my arms. Walk over to me, Laurie. Laurie can walk."

Yes, yes. Right foot, left foot. Of course. Breakfast. Dudley was coming with the car. It was good to be up. Splash of sunlight. The left wing of arm that you could raise now to pat your hair. The smooth, gold, painted-on-looking hair. The wimple of hair. Right foot. Left foot. The Max looking down. Dearly Beloved. Help me. Right foot. Left foot. Help me, Beloved.

Dr. Riley clucking to you as if you were a little dog. "Come, come, Laurie." Come! Come where? When you were standing there locked. Your knees that clung together in their rigid vise. The vise that would not budge. You wanted to tear them separate. You wanted to run to Mother. The rash

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of cold sweat that was breaking through your pores. The mockery of Mother and Dr. Riley and Miss MacAfee all standing there — urging you — when your knees were so locked! When your knees were locked! You hear! You hear! You — out there — you were locked! Locked!

Mother, you called in your terror — Fleta — Beloved — up there — I can't walk!

"Laurie, you can. You are hysterical. Walk to me. Laura can walk."

I can't. I can't. I can't. Standing there riveted in your terror. I can't walk, Mother. Beloved, where are you? Mother of God, where are you? I can't walk. I can't walk.

*

The white fog of the snow again. Dudley was coming, but how slyly it was burying you from him. You sank into it so restfully. So without desire. So tired. Lovely and beautiful escape. If only Miss MacAfee would stop daubing you with something pungent that trickled and brought you out of the white drift of the oblivion —

The smell of ammonia. It made you sneeze and cough. You hated the smell of ammonia and the way it had of bringing you to.

*

Dudley was angry. For the first time there was something rigid to the boyishly round flare of his face. Rounded curve of chin, squaring suddenly. Convex surface of cheeks stiffening into planes.

Dudley was thirty-four and for the first time you were seeing it in his face. Dudley who had a puppy kind of fluffiness in everything he did. Good-natured, floppy well-being. And here he was now, with the flat planes and the right angles suddenly out in his face and a piggy little look in his eyes.

You had to admit it. Dudley's eyes with their new hard

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focus were the small eyes of a pig. You had never noticed it before, with Dudley's face flowing so merrily around them, but now with all that area stagnant, Dudley's eyes were piggy! And you hated yourself for the observation and put out your hand on his arm.

Dudley had been so good. So incredibly good and patient. And now on top of it all, this. No wonder his face was stagnant. Like a pool caught in a basin that had no outlet. No wonder.

You wished that he had not been so good and patient. It would have made you less sorry for him.

"Dudley, I'm sorry. . . ."

"No, Laurie, I don't believe you are. God, I don't know what you are! I've done everything. Tried everything. What is it, Laurie? Is it me? Have I failed?"

"No, no, Dudley."

"Then what is it? What is the hitch between us? I'm only an everyday red-blooded sort of regular fellow. I don't pretend to be anything else, not good enough for you and all that. But at the same time, Laurie, I — we — well — are you just a regular, everyday red-blooded sort of girl, Laurie? I admit it, I don't know. *Are you?* I put out my hand to touch you and you're — sometimes it seems to me you're not there at all — I mean except with your manner. Your manner of being sweet and kind always. What's it all about, Laurie? I give up. I never have the feeling of really possessing you. Not that I am afraid of any other man, but — I give up. I give up. You elude me, Laurie. That about says it if anything does. Now what is all this about? You're well now and yet you won't be well. Is it because you don't want to be well; don't want to be married? Laurie, Laurie, tell me what is happening. Are you faking?"

You gave up, too. And, lying there, could feel the tears run down along your cheeks. You wanted to walk. With every

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fiber of your being you strained to walk, until the tears that came out of your eyes were bled tears and your legs that were rooted, ached of the effort to drag them into action. You wanted to walk. And there you lay drenched in the terror of not being able to walk . . . and Dudley — doubting.

Dudley and all the rest. Even Dr. Riley and the others who came in consultation to feel and prod. All doubting. You lying there in the trance of not being able to muster up sufficient desire to walk . . . that was all it was, they said —

You remembered an Arab chant out of an old romantic novel that you and Mary had filched at the convent from one of the older girls and read secretly at night, by candle, curled up on a single cot.

No one but God and I know what is in my heart.

No one but the Max and you. No one but God and you.

"Now that you are well, you don't seem to want to be well. That's what frightens me. Puzzles me. You can walk, Laurie. Nothing is the matter with your legs. Five doctors have stood in this room and said you can walk. There is nothing the matter with you but hysteria. Major hysteria."

"But, Dud, I'm not hyster——"

"Oh, you don't have to go off in crying fits to be hysterical. You've a form of hysterical paralysis they call trauma. Psychic trauma. You're as well as I am, and yet you have it in your head that your legs won't carry you and nothing in God's world can cure you of that idea except your own will power. Five doctors have told you that, Laurie. Now it is up to you. You don't want to be one of those exhibit cases that they write about in the medical journals, do you? Laurie — won't you walk? For me?"

You wanted to walk. You wanted to Walk. There under the sheets you were pulling at your own legs to move them.

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The rigid knees that would not pry apart. You wanted to walk.

"Dudley, I can't."

"You can. You don't want to get well. You've nothing but major hysteria — hysterical disturbance of the motor functions — that's a state of mind. Laurie, you don't want to be a little nut, do you?"

"Dudley!"

"You're stalling about something. Oh, I don't say consciously, but subconsciously there is something you're staving off. Laurie, is it marriage? Is that why you don't want to get well? Laurie, for God's sake tell me you're not stalling because you don't want to get well and marry me. I couldn't stand that. Laurie? Laurie!"

"Why, Dudley. Why, Dudley." You would have walked to him on your knees. Of pity. "Why, Dudley." He was like the floppy puppy again and his voice broke all over you and went down with its cry into your heart and you were hurting for him again. Terribly. Terribly.

"Dudley dearest, I'll try so — try so to get well for you."

"Oh, Laurie, my dearest beautiful — my lovely little urn on its side, get well, Laurie. For me. I can wait. I can be patient. Only I couldn't stand it if you didn't want to get well. You will get well. You will get well, Laurie? For me?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes. I will try, Dudley. Oh, I will!" Your heart was hurting so for him, standing there perspiring with bewilderment.

Beloved, Dearly Beloved, help me to walk. Help me to know myself — enough to understand! Open your eyes upon me, Beloved — lead me — Jesus . . . help me to walk. . . .

The eyes of the Max. The beautiful lidded eyes of the Max — night after night — pleading with them to open upon you — Beloved — help me to want to walk.

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Dudley, who was patient again. And Mother, who sat by and knitted things that were exactly the drab color of the parish poor. And Father, who puffed his pipe for the hour a day beside the bed. And Mary and Jerry, who came to town once a week —

And every day when the doctors came they stood you up and you tried — and you tried — so that your teeth were clenched, and the knees of you remained locked while you tore at them with all your effort and your eyeballs felt strained and little cords came out on your neck and the doctors with the nimble fingers of osteopathy kneaded at you, and X ray after X ray and test after test repeated the unswerving testimony of your ability to walk.

And still for the life of you, drenched there with fear, day after day, on the white fur rug before the cheval mirror, for the life of you, you could no more have pried those knees from the rigidity that bound them. Those knees of yours that formed the base of your lyre-shaped torso. You could no more have pried them apart, God — Mother of God — Beloved — where are You? Help me to walk. Make me whole again. Help me —

Poor old Dud. He came to know gradually, in his bewildered way, the way of a bull with his head down to charge and no one to charge against, that the little rash of sweat that broke out over you, was from trying to walk.

He knew now, and his being patient again and sitting there through the long afternoons of Indian summer and the long twilights and the longer evenings with his idle hands jingling coins in his pockets and his great body hitching about in wide restless attitudes from chair to chair, was harder somehow to bear than his anger.

"Dudley," you told him day after day after day, "Dudley dear, I haven't the right any more. To hold you. It's seven months now. It's too long. It's not square. You're so full

of life, Dudley. It's as if sometimes I can hear your breath beating all over the room long after you have gone. That's vitality, Dudley. You've the right to be free."

He had a way lately of grabbing your cheek between his thumb and forefinger and bunching up your face and leaning close over you, so that the roughness of his hair was in your face and his breathing that you could seem to hear beating about even after he had gone, making a little gale above the bed.

"I've waited this long and now, by God, I'm going to get you. We'll show the world. These hysteria cases wear themselves out. Some day — beautiful thing, you — to-morrow — next week — who knows? — you're going to walk off that rug and down that aisle. No bedside obsequies for me. I'm getting stubborn now."

You never, even when you were hurting the most for Dudley, mentioned the bedside ceremonial any more. It was as if you were marrying him to a broken urn, lying toppled there on its side.

Dudley of all people, whose head was always down like a bull, frantic to charge, and who threw himself about from chair to chair until they groaned under his restlessness.

One night, one still eternity of a night, in a sudden blast of terror at what had befallen you, you screamed! A harsh ribbon of a cry as if someone had split enormous silk through the quiet. And with all your strength you hurtled yourself, so that by the time Miss MacAfee and Mother, who somehow seemed always to be seated waiting on the very edge of your sleep, were at your side, you were standing upright on the floor, wobbling like one of these Russian toy dolls with cylindrical bases.

"I will walk. I will walk," you cried, and tore and strained at the locking of your knees. "I will walk. I will walk," pulling at each leg as if to break free from the suck of a

marsh that was pulling you down. "I will walk. Mother of God, help me. Beloved, help me. Mother. Father. Help me!"

"Walk! Walk!" cried Miss MacAfee, kneading her nimble fingers into the round warm contours of your knees. The knees that shone a little, ironically now, with the laughter of the dimples.

I will walk.

"Laurie, walk for Mother — walk for Mother."

"Yes, Mother, I will walk. I will walk," you cried, and with your eyes that were streaming, raised to the Max, and the eyes that seemed bursting through the lids of pity for you, seeming to pull and strain with you.

"Help me, Beloved," you cried, wabbling like the toy with the cylindrical base — clutching out with both hands — "Help me, Beloved" — wabbling — wabbling — toppling —

The days began to smell, even in the stony slit of Eighty-second Street, with the smoke curlicues that rose off mounds of old leaves that you knew were burning in the park with the little human gestures of writhing that it always fascinated you to watch.

Every day Miss MacAfee came in from her morning walk with an armful of brittle oak leaves that had turned to flaming red.

There were fine little lines under Miss MacAfee's eyes when her lashes were off her cheeks, but in the blue cape lined with red that she wore over her uniform and the small blue hat that pressed her hair out in a flare, the fine dust of the wistful kind of prettiness you could see out over her in sleep, shone in her again.

It could disappear with the mere removal of her hat and sometimes when Miss MacAfee became voluble she became

nasal, and the petty talk could rattle off the pink chute of her tongue like hard coals. Just that. *Hard* coals. It fascinated you to watch the hard kind of precision of Miss MacAfee's brain.

Efficient nurse that she was, five minutes more of massage to-day meant, nevertheless, five minutes less to-morrow. Sometimes at night, when the hysteria of fear was upon you, and Miss MacAfee, who leaped out of sleep so nimbly, had soothed you back in quiet with the most even-fingered kneadings along your brow and the back of your neck, it became a fascinating game to watch the clock.

For every wakeful minute out of her night, Miss MacAfee claimed it back in next day's nap. She was always counting. Counting minutes, counting favors, counting pulse-beats, counting drops. Counting loose coins in her purse. Counting roses that Dudley sent.

The counting Miss MacAfee. It made her rather terrible under the prettiness that dusted her.

One day, during that month of spiced haze, she came in from her walk without the leaves. There were no more. November! Eight months of lying there like the overturned urn on a bed that was beginning to smother you.

Eight months. Mother — Mother. Mother. You wanted prayers said for you. You wanted Father Hearn. . . . Mass. You wanted candles. You wanted your pearl and sapphire rosary. It was as if you could never say your Hail Marys burningly enough. Burningly enough. Beloved — You — open Your eyes upon me —

There had been a new doctor. A specialist from Baltimore. There had been so many. Nine. And always the same diagnosis. Trauma. Hysteria. But what hysteria? Why, you wanted to walk! Every time they stood you up and you toppled over like a toy with a cylindrical base, you tore at your knees with all your strength until the rash of sweat broke out over you.

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It was terrible, it was terrible, it was terrible to be rooted.

The doctor from Baltimore had slapped you cruelly all over your body and pricked you with needles and stung you with electrical appliances up and down your legs and against your knees, and even in their pain they would not so much as writhe for you and yet you kept pulling and straining. Those white knees of yours; moons; locked in their rigidity and in their pain.

"I want to walk! Dudley, do you hear me, I want to walk!"

"When you keep saying that, Laurie," cried Dudley one evening, pouncing over the bed so that his rough shag of hair was in your face and squeezing your wrists until his finger nails dug in, "what do you mean? Just what, Laurie? That you want to get well to walk with me — down the aisle — to be married — is that what you mean?" His teeth were so bare and so close you could feel their warmth.

"Just that — Dudley ——"

"Just what?"

"Just — that ——"

Mary and Jerry were there that evening, too. For the first time you let Jerry mix you one of the ginger-ale highballs. Of course no one would admit it, but it seemed to you that you could feel the room boil with the impatient, the suppressed youth, the suppressed exuberance of Mary and Jerry and Dudley helping to while away your tedium with their tedium.

And so you let Jerry mix you the ginger-ale highball. For their tedium. Miss MacAfee counting the number of drops you were allowed to have, out of the silver hip flask. You hated the taste, but it was for Dudley. Poor Dudley who was hurting you with being patient again. So patient. The highball ran down you in a fiery fashion that made a hot path right through you and stung and made your laughter come

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in the old-fashioned way it used to and you knew recklessly that you were going to walk. Soon too.

"I'm going to walk. I'm going to walk."

That warm path down through you. Dudley's face so close — until you could see two of him. The mash of his lips down against your eyelids. The singing little path of warmth through your being.

Why, for an instant, you wanted to walk — yes, yes, enough even to walk down the aisle with Dudley.

Creeping November. Days that could seem to lie on your forehead like a damp cloth. For two weeks it had rained every day in the slanting poles against your window. Father was too crippled with it to manage to get upstairs to sit in his silence beside your bed and the most devastating state of futility seemed to have laid hold of Mother. She puttered so. Forever dropping the gray poverty-colored ball of her knitting wools. Getting wound in them. Straightening your covers that were already straightened. Doing over again the trifles of straightening bottles that had already been straightened. Placing a fresh tumbler of water on a table where one had already been placed. Poor Mother. These depressed days were the weight and color of a soggy old sponge. They depressed her in a way that kept her going through the house all through the days from pillar to post. You gritted your teeth under all her futilities and closed your eyes and tried to be sweet to her. You *were* sweet with your heart, it ran over with the love of pity and the pity of love for her, except, and this was terrible, the gritty little presence of Mother could goose-flesh you. It was as if while she puttered, someone were scraping a gold ring along a slate.

The woman at whom no one ever looked, you said to yourself once of Mother. Monstrous isolation of being that. Father who never looked. Fleta who was sweet with Mother,

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but who could sew and talk with her for hours without ever looking up. You — yourself — how seldom you looked at Mother with your attention. Mother, the woman at whom no one ever looked. . . .

The new osteopath who came twice a day manipulated you this way and that, until your shoulder blades almost touched. It left you with a gone feeling. Like lying at the bottom of a lake that the water was all drained out of. Low marshy days without buoy to them. Mary and Jerry who were gay in the harsh rowdy fashion that a street fair can be gay, were in Atlantic City for a cold that Mary had developed and Dudley had acquired that same kind of cold and came evenings with red rims about his eyes and a chilled feeling up his spine that kept Miss MacAfee stirring him hot lemonades.

His cold made a great baby of Dudley. The chilled huddle of him was one of uncomplaining dejection. It kept you soothing him and smoothing him and he dogged at Miss MacAfee for attention. His temperature must be taken. Great big baby of a Dudley fearing he had fever. Then his pulse must be counted. Counting Miss MacAfee. And all of one soggy Saturday afternoon, he sat huddled with two blankets over his shoulders sipping the hot lemonades. Great big baby of a Dudley. You went off finally into a long sweet nap with Miss MacAfee amusedly ministering to the great big babyishness of Dudley.

A gray mole of a dusk. You woke into it with a shudder. It flowed like smoke. It clogged your throat. You sat up into it as if to push it off your chest. It was not often you sat up without aid. It gave you a thrill.

Ah!

Through the cheval mirror, there was Dudley still in his chair, but the blankets dragged down from across his shoulders, and in his lap, scooped to him closely like a babe in

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his arms, Miss MacAfee, her head dangling backward a little so that her eyes, as you met them, were upside down. Miss MacAfee lying in Dudley's arms —

The fog of the twilight. There became something furious to it as if it were winding like troubled music the way it did in the picture you loved so of St. Cecilia at the organ.

The room was full of it. The winding of the fog. The fog of the troubled music and you sitting up in it and piercing it with your gilt little egg of a head. The eyes of Miss MacAfee, there in Dudley's embrace, upside down across Dudley's knee, caught there, held there, stunned there, looking through the cheval mirror, horrified, into your very own.

And then the head of Dudley, jerking around funnily inch by inch and there with the head of Miss MacAfee still across his knee, meeting your eyes through the fog. The troubled fog. The winding fog. The choking opera-bouffe fog. . . .

You wanted to giggle. And had difficulty keeping it from breaking into sprays along your lips. The upside-down eyes of Miss MacAfee. The lids of them were like small dish-pans set out to drain. The same lids that could droop in her sleep and lay the lashes so poignantly along her cheeks.

The upside-down eyes of Miss MacAfee freezing into two of the shrillest pools as you looked into them and then that jerking of Dudley's head as it turned! The wooden-soldier turning of Dudley's head! You had to swallow down the giggle so that the spray of it beat about inside of you in cataracts. Wild little cataracts.

"Please close the window," you said. There was no believing your ears but that was precisely what you were saying through all the leaping cataracts of the laughter. Please close the window as if you had just raised yourself up to say it and now would lay yourself back quietly again.

The bang of the window and Miss MacAfee oozing out

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through the twilight that flowed after her, as if holding out merciful skirts to conceal the ignominy of that exit.

No one but God and you knew what was in your heart! No. No. No one but God. Not even you. The relief! It was as if your heart had come uncocked and something in it that had kept it tight and hurting was running out. And yet there was pain. No one but God knew what that was in your heart. Love of Dudley. Dread of Dudley. Pity for Dudley. All the fears. All the loves. All the indecisions. All the chagrin — milling around — milling around. No one but God — not even you — knew what was in your heart.

If only Dudley were not going to try to explain. You knew that he was. He kept clearing his throat and putting two fingers inside his collar and his eyes that had red rims around them from his cold, and from looking foolish, had a loose lack of consistency to them as if they had not quite jelled.

If only Dudley would not try to explain. There was nothing to explain. You knew it all before him and ahead of him. Besides, what right had you to sit in judgment on Dudley, whom you had been holding while you doubted?

Suddenly you realized. The torments of the rivers of doubt that had been running under your consciousness. And even now, knowing the enormity of your relief, even now, it was hard to give up Dudley. The pleasant habit of Dudley. Dudley was so full of life. The room that he inhabited was so full of life long after he had left it.

If only he wouldn't, though, try to explain. If only.

Your vanity lay all crushed about you as if it had been a goldfish aquarium in which you dwelt and even while you knew that you were not at all mortally hurt, you felt cut and splintered and a spray of tears was on the edge of your desire to laugh.

"Please — please don't explain. There is nothing to explain."

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"Laurie, I swear to you, Laurie, so help me God, it's the first time . . ."

There they came. There they came. The words. Hailstones of them that scarcely touched you at all, but melted in the twilight between you.

"Dudley, Dudley, you must understand. I'm not blaming you." And you weren't! Why, you weren't even mortally, much less morally, hurt. And for not being mortally hurt and with your vanity only crushed, you felt waves of contrition for Dudley. Dudley thinking you mortally hurt. Waves and waves of contrition for being so insulated away from him all these months that he had not the power to wound you, mortally.

There you were again with your pity. Pitying Dudley who sat there with his eyes literally turned to sheep's eyes before you.

"Laurie, my dearest, you've got to believe me. I must have been a little mad. Why, Laurie, I've never even noticed her before to-day. Not really, I mean. Of course I've known she was about. But her puttering over this darn cold of mine. All of a sudden to-day — little redhead — Laurie, will you believe me — will you, before Him up there on your shrine? — I got a little crazy, that's all. A man's a man. Will you understand? But you can't. You're like a little saint in a niche. The Lord must have had a nun or something in mind when He made you!"

"Dudley!"

"You don't realize it, Laurie, but that's the way you sometimes seem to just an ordinary fellow like me. Honey, are you enough of just an ordinary girl to understand, or are you so far up in your niche that you can't? What niche? I don't know, only sometimes I can't seem to find you. It frightens me. I'm just a red-blooded fellow, Laurie. I'm not ashamed to say it. It's been months now — Laurie — months of waiting — and

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you don't desire, Laurie. What's the use beating about the bush any longer? I do! I do desire! Now what are we going to do about it?"

Here was Dudley precipitating for you what you should have done long ago. To have done nothing about it all these months. . . .

"Why, Dudley dear, do? Why, I'm going to let you go."

"No. No, Laurie. I didn't mean that. Don't make me out low enough to quit now, while you're down."

There! It was out! Dudley was trying to do the sporting thing. Dudley was tired. Imprisoned. Beating about his cage, your sick room, and you who had opened the door for him ever so slightly, must open it wide enough for him to go now, without conscience.

It was incredible, the sudden conflict in you. The selfish conflict between wanting and not wanting to let him go. Dudley whose face still looked a little fat — that dreadful jade-fat look of it while the head of Miss MacAfee lopped across his knee. It was horrid of you not to have the clean-cut reaction of loathing. And yet, even as you were opening the door wide — that love born of your pity for Dudley — that pity born of your love —

"Dudley — I couldn't ever — not after — her — just now. Not after that! Never. I'm not blaming you. Only freeing you."

"I'll never be the one to ask to be free."

Dudley with his face looking fat, gazing after the twilight that had swished like skirts to conceal the exit of Miss MacAfee. How she bumbled somewhere beyond the hallway. It sounded like packing.

"No, Dudley dear, I'll be the one to free you."

"I'll stand by."

"No."

"But, Laurie —"

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"Dudley — we may as well face facts — I somehow — I'm not getting better. The months may drag into — who knows? It is not fair to you — Dud. . . ."

"You're throwing me over, Laurie."

You could have laughed and cried at the transparency of that! Dudley was trembling. Dudley was trembling at every inch wide of the opening of the door and the wider you opened it, the more he kept repeating and repeating in expiation: "You're throwing me over." His eyes with that piggy look to them gazing after the swishing skirts of the twilight.

It was happening. It was happening. Dudley was wanting you to open the door. But so that his own hand never touched it. That was Dudley's notion of the sporting thing to do. Never to have opened it himself, but since you were holding it wide enough so that he could pass out, not of his own seeming volition, but yours. Dudley was going. Walking out with as much dignity as he could muster.

And now that it had come, in spite of the torments that had been flowing through you for so long on the rivers of your doubts — in spite of the torments, it was terrible to be left lying there alone in the twilight. Helpless. It was terrible. Terrible and alone.

"Dudley!"

But there was Dudley oozing out too, behind the skirts of the twilight that gathered to hide him.

"You've thrown me over. I might have known . . . too good for me . . . Little Laurie . . . thrown me over. . . ."

The skirts of the twilight that had rushed up about Miss MacAfee, crowding around to conceal his exit. . . .

You've thrown me over.

*

Terribleness of being alone. The face of Dudley curling at you and licking its chops in self-expiation. Cunning expia-

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tion. The fatty face of Dudley in all its frailty. Poor Dudley. The frailties all about you, that you wanted to succor with hands that curled in the merciful gesture of Mother Agatha's hands.

Frailties that you would run to succor. But you had not the legs! Terribleness of lying there helpless when you would run to succor.

Beloved, you cried and beat upon the bed with your fists and flung your body up and down until the springs rang. Beloved, make me walk! God, You. Godhead. Son of Mary. You, the Max. Up there shining. Beloved, make me whole again. Make me whole once more, you cried into the thick smother of twilight, and dragged yourself with the blood roaring in your ears, up to a sitting posture on the side of the bed and then — and then — there you stood swaying, on the feet that made you wobble like the toy with the cylindrical base.

There you stood swaying — eyes streaming, hair streaming, arms streaming through the gloom — up — up — to Him — the Max —

Godhead. Beloved. You. Help me to walk. Help me, Beloved. Help me and I — will come to You! To You only. I will be Your bride! The perpetual and untouched bride of God.

The pouring of the fog — all yellow now and mole-colored —

"Little Nun, you," Frank had called you.

"I am that, Beloved. Ever since I have been a little girl — I see it now — that is how You have made me, Beloved. Your nun. Nun among the lilies, walking toward You. Dudley — his is the love of man for woman. Mine — mine, O Beloved, is love of You. I am for You. Open Your eyes upon me. Give me the power to walk. For You. Give me back my legs that I may walk out among the frailties — for

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You, Beloved. Give me back my legs — and I promise You, Beloved — I promise You — to walk on them — to You!"

The pouring of the twilight.

God — God — Beloved — give me back my legs — and I will use them to walk to You. Your bride.

The pouring of the twilight. . . .

Beloved — Beloved — look — cause Your eyes to open upon me and make me walk! Then take me. Nun among the Lilies — take me, Father —

The quivering of the lids . . . the veined and hurting quivering of the lids —

Beloved, look upon me and I will walk!!!

The eyes! The eyes! Like gashes opening up. The eyes opening in their magnificence upon you. Full! The eyes of the Max opening to drench you.

Beloved, I will walk!

The eyes and their light pouring through the dusk, the warmth rushing up, the untensing of the knees as if something had thawed.

"Beloved!"

The open eyes of the Max — benign in their streaming beauty and upon you!

The untensing — the untensing of the knees — the warmth rushing up through them into a gush at your throat.

Beloved — help —

The warmth! The blinding warmth of the eyes — thawing you —

Beloved — Beloved — Godhead — You — I am walking. You have made me walk by causing Your eyes to open upon me. I walk to kiss Your feet. I walk to hack my flesh, to make it bleed for love of You. I am Yours now. . . . Perpetually. I promise! Yours, Beloved. Your nun. Your bride!

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The scurrying of bare feet across the carpet. Your feet. Your feet. Little pink pads carrying you swiftly and surely across the carpet.

“Mother — Father — Kate — quick — somebody — everybody — light, quick! I can walk!”

BOOK III

BOOK III

A DOZEN times a day that consciousness of somewhere a pool of enormous tranquillity that seemed bottomless. A pool in a forest. A pool in a silence. A pool in your heart. There it was, that sense of water that had been plunging in the white whirl of a cataract, subsiding suddenly into that bottomless pool of tranquillity.

Something so minute in its beauty that it was almost too precious for the senses to capture, had happened. You had seen the opening of the eyes of the Max. Upon you!

You, Laura Regan. The bride.

HIS bride.

You trembled sometimes of a fear that ran something like this: What if the cataract, the cataract of all your torments and doubts, had never found its pool? The pool of the bottomless tranquillity. The tranquillity of being His bride!

What if it had never come with the opening of the Eyes upon you!

All the years — all the years that He had been calling you to Service, and you, in the torment and the doubts, had not heard. And now — why, with the opening of the Eyes to heal you, it was as if He had appeared as evidently as in the case of the apostles or of Saul on his way to Damascus.

The Eyes of the Max — opening on you!

Of course, you knew in your heart that it was not as in the case of the apostles. Thousands of girls like you, nice, everyday girls with no more equipment than trusting hearts and willing hands, were in the convents. Some way they too must have received the invitation.

It was a qualification. A qualification to serve. Just as

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Mother's vocation had been to serve in the family. Her convent was the home.

It was so simple. And here was everyone making it hard. Even Mother. Fleta. Father Hearn. The bishop himself, with whom Father, who gave largely in annual sums to the Church, had arranged an interview. Even Mother Agatha, who had cried at first and kissed you and shaken you by the shoulders for all the world as Mary had done the night you told her you were engaged to Dudley. Even Mother Agatha, later, was to make it hard for you. But at first, with the tears running and blistering the starch of her wimple . . .

"Laurie, my child. Little sister, you have come to us! Laurie has found God. Laurie is coming into the fold. And oh, you will never be sorry."

"Mother, I have never been truly happy before."

"Within the convent Jesus is the Superior Friend Lover. He has cured you, Laurie, with His Love. He has caused His light to shine upon you."

"Yes, Mother — He opened His Eyes upon me — I walked ——"

"You will never regret leaving all to follow Him. It is hard to realize the little Laurie I knew — the little Laurie who learned her devotionals so badly — and yet I remember — Nun among the Lilies. There was something about you. The sisters all remarked it. You were very close to Him that afternoon, Laurie. Your little face thrust ahead. I can see it before me — and now you have come close to Him to stay, Laurie, our little Laurie has found God."

You dug into the Gothic arch of Mother Agatha's drapes. The dear creaking of her fluted white cornette. . . .

Sensible, everyday Mother Agatha with the face like the lit lamp; you could feel your cheek against hers, and the little taupe-colored mole with the single hair in it that Mary and you used to caricature on the backs of your textbooks.

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It made her dear and human and God-kissed all at once. The taupe-colored mole. So dear. So somehow of your very own clay.

The clay of Laura Regan whose tumult and whose torment all those years, had meant merely the love of the kind of maiden who chose Christ for her Beloved. That was all there was to it.

It was precisely as if suddenly you had found your vocation. It was no different to marry into the life of the convent than into the life of a home. To leave one home for another.

"Mother Agatha, you must help me now — more than all the rest. The bishop said to seek out my nearest and dearest in the Church for advice. You are those, Mother. I want to choose my order."

"Dear child, to choose your order is only to select the kind of service for which He has best fitted you. You must give the matter study. You must make sure of yourself."

"I am sure, Mother, I have always been sure without realizing it. I know that the contemplative orders are not for me. I want to go out, Mother. Among those who need. Among the women who need so terribly. Service."

"That is fine, Daughter. Lifting the fallen ones. He was not too proud to do it with His own hands. He lifted them up. . . ."

"You remember, Mother, once you sent me to House of Mercy with a package? Mary Kinealy and me. I want to do their kind of work, Mother. There was one with the two iron keys — a lay nun opened the door — I can never forget — I want to work, Mother, like they work — among the Magdalenes — why are they trying to make me wait, Mother, before I decide? Mother, Father, Fleta, Father Hearn. All. I have promised. I promised the Eyes, and they opened upon me. Mother, I am pledged! I am ready."

And then Mother Agatha, suddenly becoming like all the

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others. Stiffening, and drying her emotions as if they had been tears. It was terrible. You did not want to wait. You could have beaten with your fists against the closed portals of the convent. You came bearing the gifts of a full heart and willing hands and adoration and there stood the Church, cautious of you. Even a little suspicious.

First Mother and Father. That curious look in Mother's eyes. Fear of this marriage to the Church which would take you so uncompromisingly unto itself and joy at your release from an earthly union that might have bound you until the beauty ran out of you and left you as limp as the emptied old bean bag.

Even Fleta, to whom the idea of marriage to the Church was as terrifying as thunder and as superb, had looked at you with something of that in her eyes. Perpetual bride, you! Perpetual beauty of being that . . . but . . . but . . .

Father and Mother and Fleta, each for secret ashamed reasons glad that you were to be spared what might be their same disillusionments of earthly marriage and yet terrified. . . .

There had been a nun on Mother's side of the family. A great-aunt. A Carmelite who had entered an Irish House at fifteen and died at eighty-four. Eighty-four years young, so the legend went. She had died in a fire, saving children, for whom she had washed, ironed and sewed, up to the hour of her death.

If only they would all cease being cautious of you! Cautious and suspicious. Mother, Father, Fleta. The bishop. And now Mother Agatha, suddenly slamming down her emotion as if it had been an unruly jack in the box.

"Laura, have you talked with your confessor?"

"Yes, yes, Mother. Many, many times."

"And your parents?"

"Yes, Mother."

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"And your God? Oh, Laurie, have you talked intimately with your God?"

"Mother, I am pledged to Him. He opened His eyes upon me ——"

"Laurie, it is not enough to like a career in order to adopt it. One must consider the qualifications it calls for. Ours is a spiritual industry, my child."

Dear Mother Agatha, with the workaday and the sublime all mixed up in her.

"There is not much romance in the nun's career except in novels. Sentimental young girls, my child, often mistake a feeling of exaltation for a vocation. You have just passed through an emotional crisis. The Church must be cautious of you, Laurie. Do not lose sight of the fact that convent life is hard, steady and often monotonous work, only made precious and sublime by the love of Christ, in whose name it is undertaken."

Here it was all over again. When your eyes felt like flames and your body was crammed with heartbeat and your hands, your white wings of hands — you wanted to send them out — out — now — willing doves — to do His service. Here it was all over again. The caution. The suspicion.

"Laurie, you who love life, have you any idea what renunciation of it means ——"

"I have, Mother Agatha, I have ——"

"Ah, but Laurie, perhaps you only think you have. Are you sure that the spiritual marriage is for you? God wants good mothers and fathers in the world, Laurie. Their love of Him may be just as strong as the love of Him that is found inside the convent, but their vocation is along other paths. Your beauty, Laurie, had made you susceptible to love of life where a plainer girl might ——"

"Mother — Mother — you must believe me."

"It is not the kind of life, Laurie, that makes the saint.

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But the manner of living it. There are men and women living saintly lives who are out in the maelstrom of the world. St. Anne and St. Joachim were great saints filled with the love of Him and chosen to be parents of the blessed Virgin. Blanche, the mother of St. Louis, gave to the world a model ruler and king and was herself a saint. St. Monica gave to the Church St. Augustine.

"This saintly mother of a saint is a type of high sanctity in the Christian home. Remember, Laurie, keep it before you like a banner of fire. By the choice of a religious life, no matter what order she chooses, the sister strips herself of all attachment to the things of earth, just as effectually as could be done by death! Jesus Christ is served out of pure love. Are you more drawn by the love of Christ than by the love of man, Laurie? Oh, child, child, give yourself time to make sure."

"Mother, I tell you I have been walking toward Him without knowing it all my life. And now I know!"

"Those who enter the convent, Laurie, are not different in flesh and blood from the rest. Their love of life and liberty is as strong as that of the others, but their love of Himself must be stronger still. They must give all as gladly as a bridal token to their Beloved."

To the Beloved. To the Beloved. Why, it was as if, there in the shade of Mother Agatha's robes, you wanted to wind yourself in them and cause your willing hands to flutter like doves off your wrists to Him. Your Beloved — shining up there beside the altar in St. Vincent's chapel.

"Mother, how can I find the words to talk to you intimately enough? Even you — to whom I can talk more closely than to my confessor. God has picked me for a spiritual marriage, Mother, just as surely as He has picked millions of other girls for marriage of the flesh. From the beginning I have been that kind of a person without ever

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realizing it. Mother, hear me — I tell you that night — the Eyes — the Eyes opened upon me and I walked!"

"No miracle is too great for Him."

"I had been so afraid, Mother — all the months — so secretly afraid. Even when the kind of love that — that makes us mothers of babies used to flash over me once in a while — for Dudley — Mother — that other feeling — always the other was bigger and between me and earthly love. I did not know, though, I could not know until that night — the Eyes — they opened, Mother, to my promise, and made me walk. They opened and I gave my word. He has made me beautiful like this, Mother, because I am His bride. That is why I have never been ashamed to own I am beautiful. I am for Him. But even, Mother, when I am no longer young like this, but old and tired like Mother and overblown like Fleta, He will not tire of me, Mother."

"He will not tire of you, Daughter."

"Mother, I want to come to Him — now. Open the convent door. I want to adore Him by constant prayer and worship of the blessed sacrament. I want to lift the fallen for Him. To give Him my hands and my heart as He has given me my feet."

"Oh, my Daughter. . . ."

"I do not want to nurse or teach or care for the aged. But with my hands, Mother, I want to help to lift them up. To find for the Magdalens their spiritual feet. The Magdalens. As He has found me my feet. Mother — open the door ——"

The practicability. The practicability. You clapped your hands to your ears to the drone of it.

"Laurie, Father Hearn and Bishop Meighan are right. You must wait a year. You must, my child. If at the end of that time you are as full of God as we hope and pray you are — then, dear child, come to us. But remember, the convent is

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not for everybody. It is a distinct calling and those who are called must know it calmly."

"I am calm — Mother ——"

"Marriage is a vocation for most people. It is God's ordination in the world for its perpetuation. But as in His days on earth He chose certain souls to stand apart and devote themselves to Him, so now. Only you must be sure."

"He has chosen me, Mother ——"

"Many a girl with an unfortunate love experience has turned hysterically to the convent without realizing that the sister's career is a life hidden in Christ, that it abounds in privations and restrictions and that it is characterized by routine."

"Mother, I want to belong entirely to Him ——"

"Yes, Laurie, but not hysterically. Take a year before you decide to enter the period of the novitiate. Go regularly to confession. Come regularly to me. Wait and pray a little longer and then, if after the period of novitiate, you find the life suitable and the order finds you in turn desirable, the convent will welcome you with open arms. Wait, my child. Pray, my child. Convent life calls for sublime renunciation. 'If thou wilt be My disciple, deny thyself, take up thy cross and follow Me.'"

Take up thy cross. . . .

Where was there one heavy enough for your willing feet to carry? You wanted to dig with your finger nails; you wanted to scorch your flesh under some sun — you wanted to feel the scrape of garments of poverty against the grain of your being — take up thy cross? Where was one heavy enough . . . ?

God — You — Beloved — whose Eyes have opened upon me — guide me to You!

You wanted to run barefoot across stones that bruised and tore you for the ecstasy of feeling your feet, that He had made to walk, bleed for Him.

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It was like holding back a race horse, quivering with mettle. Your feet that wanted to be so swift. . . .

A year. You thought of it with an invariable little frenzy that clenched up your palms.

A year. You wanted to be calm and await it as He would have you await your nuptials with Him. To serve Him with your patience as the holy women in the gospel served Him personally when He was on earth.

Frank had once translated for you the Latin, in its elaborate script, that was written under your framed little engraving of St. Theresa:

"Aut mori, Domine, aut pati." "O Lord, if I cannot suffer for Thee, let me die."

What were any of the body fires compared to the supreme burning passion of that! O Lord, if I cannot suffer for Thee, let me die. That flame was like the flame in a diamond. Without benefit of fuel. White flame of fanaticism. Quenchless.

What terrors can sacrifice have for those whose hands are lit with the desire to serve!

Your burning hands.

The year to wait with them. The year between you and the cloister that would bring you to your Beloved Spouse. It was not enough, your daily mass. Your daily adoration of the blessed sacrament. The waiting. The frenzied waiting that sent your finger nails up into your palms.

And yet, subtly, life taking up its pace again. There you were in the little routine of the house on Eighty-second Street. The same seven-thirty breakfast in the basement dining room. Just the three of you, now. Father with his face that was hung on like a lantern. Mother at whom nobody ever looked, forever tinkering among the coffee cups and stacking them in the way you hated. Kate, with the sore-throat rag, slip-slopping through the swinging doors.

The year. And the controversy of your novitiate packed

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away, by tacit family agreement, into the silence of that year. Not to be discussed. You preferred it that way. The secret of your nuptials — the kind of nuptials for which you had been foreordained. It was curious going through the days so calmly, with the glitter of that kind of silence between you and Father and Mother.

Their new furtive way of regarding you. Their mixture of relief for you and doubt of you and awe of you and daze and pride and fear. . . .

The glittering silence of the waiting . . . the glittering secret. . . .

It was fantastic talking to Mary across the glitter of secret you had from her.

More than once Mary remarked it:

"You're not Laurie any more. You are in a trance. Is it Dudley? Remember, for every fish that has come out of the sea, there is another just as good waiting for bait. Besides, he's not worth it. No man is. Least of all, one who could take up with that MacAfee creature, after you! I hear it's all on between them and that's enough for me. Pfu! Come to Europe with us and stop your pining. . . ."

Pining! If Mary only knew! If Mary only knew!

Autumn again and the slanting poles of the rain. Weeks of it. Sometimes on your way to early mass, your stockings, even through overshoes, squeaked and made bubbles and by squeezing your toes together very tightly, you kept away the sense of sopping wetness.

Kneeling there with them down against the stone floor of St. Xavier's Chapel, your feet could feel cold enough to seem to drop away. . . .

The smell of the damp. The dim gray of the charwomen who came to this earliest mass on their way to work, their faces like stone gargoyles on the spouts of long lean necks.

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This dawn-gray congregation of the gargoyles. The mumbling along toothless gums. Furiously old women, needing you. Servant girls with sticky eyes, needing you. Once you went up to one who was sniveling and coughing over her beads and put your hand on her arm. And she shied away. Needing you.

To walk among them in His name, in His garb. The ready flow of your pity. The white wings of your hands. Your feet that He had given you, ready to speed to them. In His name. In His garb.

Your daily holy mass was preparation. The wonder and the piercing mystery of starting each waiting day of that waiting year with mass. There was no way to convey the preciousness of it.

You, Laura Regan. The bride. His.

Ecstasy and solemnity of the consecration. The priest before the altar raising above the level of his head the Host. The chalice. The tinkling of the little bell at each elevation.

O Jesus, I adore Thee. . . .

The little faintness from having fasted and ecstasy of walking to the altar rail to receive Him sacramentally. His flesh. His blood. Into yours. The roar of the ecstasy in your ears and red as blood before your eyes.

"Agnus Dei. Agnus Dei. Agnus Dei. Domine Non Sum Dignus. Domine Non Sum Dignus. Domine Non Sum Dignus."

"I love Thee, O Lord, and I wish to love Thee more and more."

The waiting days of the waiting year.

There was so much to be done. The stripping of your room was like putting your house in order. And with each jerking down of a rose-colored curtain or putting away of lace and taffetas, the Max seemed to grow a little larger. Actually that. The dominating of the little shrine. The Eyes, open, seeming to open wide as the room grew leaner.

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The stripping of the room. One day you and Kate, who cried easily and annoyingly now every time she looked at you, lugged the white bear down into the parlor and turned the cheval mirror to the wall and folded away the taffeta coverlet and lace pillows from the chaise longue, and wrapped the gold things from the dressing table into wads of cotton and fitted them back into boxes.

His poverty. His chastity. He who was a virgin had chosen you, who loved virginity, for spiritual marriage.

It made the wrappings of the little gold and enameled boxes that were to be returned to Dudley, labor of the most profoundly joyous renunciation.

The pearls that had melted so against your whiteness, back into the long white satin ridge of the jeweler's case. The pearl solitaire engagement ring that had gripped you in a band of pain the night that Dudley slid it on. The tiny crusted wrist watch, like Mary's that you wound with a sapphire.

The stripping and the stripping. The white-fox scarf for Mary. The coral necklace and bracelet that Aunt Tane had given you for Fleta. The set of Edgar Allan Poe that had come with a year's subscription to a periodical and that you had never been able to read very assiduously, and your copy of Golden Treasury, for Stella.

The knickknacks you gave to Kate, who kept sniffing.

Why had you never before felt their clutter and suffocation? Now rid of them all, the Eyes came at you so large from the new poverty of the room?

Imitation of Christ. Poverty must be a blessed state since He chose it. Having riches and poverty set before Him, He chose to be poor.

Day by day, to make it seem as little remarkable as possible, the gradual stripping.

You were glad when Mary and Jerry sailed for Europe. It

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made the stripping less conspicuous. You tried to accomplish it almost imperceptibly.

Your own first communion prayer-book of mother-of-pearl for Stella, whose baby was about to be born, to carry with her to its baptism.

What if Frank and Stella's baby were to be denied baptism!

Frank had once laughed and turned over on his side and gone back to sleep when you had wakened him to go to Bennet's baptism. And there was that birthday gift from Stella to Frank, a volume of "Thus Spake Zarathustra," that you had seen on this table, inscribed in Stella's flowing hand: "To Frank, who is mad enough and wise enough to understand."

Frank and Stella who read Nietzsche. And Nietzsche was Antichrist; even the little forays into the book which had made the back of your neck ache, had told you that much. Your pity flooded out to them. And to Mother and Father who, after all, only knew Him in the neat, God-fearing, automatic way of Sunday-morning mass and feast days and ritual of baptism, holy communion, church dues, marriage and death.

You, Laura Regan, upon whom the Eyes had opened, wanted to share their Light. With Frank and Stella and Kate and Mother and Father and Mary. With Jerry. With Dudley! With the whirl of the faces you passed in the street.

Sometimes when you took the elevated train down to the Church of the Perpetual Adoration, the faces that passed you were like a river rushing swirlingly to some sea. They were too quick for you. The torrent of them. The little drops of your pity and your love out into that angry torrent. There were moments when your courage waned. Your shoulders felt so frail as they pushed and jostled you about. The faces. The ogling of the men. You upon whom the Eyes of the Max had opened. Their smeary looks across your breast and down

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to your ankles. Hot sordid tides of life. Had you enough love to go around? Enough of pity? Sometimes you wept your doubts and your fears to Father Hearn. To Mother Agatha. More often you knelt with them before the Max and prayed them into courage.

One day the room was quite bare. As bare as a room could be that was not a cell. And Mother, who had skirted the performance with her anxiety and her futility and her quivering manner of awe of you; fear for you; broke through the frail pretense of her silence when she came upon you packing away the last of the little lace and lingerie pillows that you had so liked to stack up behind you and lie there purring at the contour of your own loveliness coming back at you from the cheval mirror.

"Laurie," she cried, and sank down in that mousy little huddle of her. "I can't bear it. It's as if you were dead and putting away your things after yourself. Laurie, don't leave me ——"

The clutch of fear at your heart for Mother. Fear of leaving her to the gray little huddle of herself. Mother, at whom nobody ever looked. Not even you! And even now, the little prickles of annoyance at her futility out over you. Oh, Mother — Mother!

"Laurie, I know I promised we are not to speak of it . . . until you have had time to consider and wait and pray . . . but I can't stand it, Daughter. I can see that your mind is made up. Don't make me a stranger to you, Daughter. I must ask. Laurie, Laurie, are you going to leave us?"

The pale blue clinging burs of Mother's eyes! Frank whose face had even now the look of horror from having had to brush them off. The clinging burs. . . . You tried to make your voice seem casual through your terror of them clinging against your averted look.

"Mother, there is nothing so dramatic as all that about it,

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dear. Suppose I were marrying and going away to another city to live. You would willingly enough make every sacrifice to give me up to some man — don't you see, dear?"

You could no more have talked to Mother in terms of Him. It was hard even to talk to Father Hearn. Even to Mother Agatha. Think of that! Even to Mother Agatha who had walked in His beauty for fifty years. . . .

The little practicabilities — the little day-by-day trifles of preparation you could have talked with Mother. If only there had been something to correspond with the tying of the ribbons! There was. Only it was the untying of the ribbons and Mother could never have stood that. The perfumed little collapsings of the stacks of the trousseau things.

You could have talked with Mother the choosing of your order if only she would not cry.

"Laurie, Laurie — the hardships — the privations — the monotony."

"The peace! The beauty!" you could have shouted.

"Oh, Mother, Mother — what is there I can say to you that will help you to understand? . . ."

"What if every girl disappointed in a love affair threw herself into a convent ——"

You could have laughed. Why, a chain that had lain across your heart for every day of your having been Dudley's, was lifted. And the threat of the wedding veil, which had stood once at the foot of the bed, had lifted. And the fear that used to strike out at you even through the thrill of the hot mash of kisses against your eyelids — had lifted.

Oh, Mother — Mother. It was almost as if you were talking to her through a grating. The grating between her world and yours. The grating behind which you would pray for her.

"You have been raised to every luxury, Laurie. No matter how hard he has been, Laurie, your father, who has never in-

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indulged anyone in his life, has indulged you. Laurie, you're not strong. You're pampered. You're not fit for the hardships of the convent."

"Mother, I was never so strong!"

"I have heard of nuns dying in their novitiate of the hardships. Not all girls are made for it. Laurie, God forgive me for denying you to Him — but I'm alone, Laurie, and He has so many — in the convents — I'm all alone, Laurie — Frank has gone from me — Fleta back to her duty — Laurie, don't leave Mother alone."

You were all twisted inside. You bled for the huddle of Mother. But if only she wouldn't putter. At her shawl. At you. At the corners of her handkerchiefs when she pulled them out from being a wet daub. Your pity all mingled with your nervousness at Mother's putterings.

You who so loved His forbearance, full of the old secret irritations that Mother could cause to break out in a rash over you — fear of your unfitness smote you — fear of the lack of forbearance that could cause you to sting with the futility of Mother. You took her into the huddle of your arms — you kissed her tears that could irritate you so —

"Mother, Mother, you are not losing me. The love of a woman for her Lover does not need to lessen her love for her Mother ——"

"But, Laurie ——"

"Holy love, Mother dear, while it claims the whole heart, yet makes the love for parents greater than it was before. Mother, learn to be happy for yourself and for me."

"You are my little girl. My pussy. My beauty. My good and tender child. I cannot see you preparing for your shroud like this."

"Shroud! Why, Mother, I've never been a bride until now, I am a perpetual bride, Mother. Think of that. Nothing can tarnish me in His eyes."

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"I know. I know. You think because Dudley did not wait ——"

"Ah, but He wants me whether I am old or whether I am young, or whether I am lame or halt or blind, Mother. Think, Mother — always to be beautiful in the eyes of one's Lover. Dudley grew tired when my flesh grew sick, Mother!"

"That does not mean, Daughter ——"

"Mother, *you!* Mother, *you* — *you* of all women! *You* should understand. Surely *you!* The tragedy of withering flesh . . . *you!*"

The cruel, the grilling thing that you had said. Your teeth jammed down into your tongue like brakes. To have said that to Mother at whom Father never looked. . . .

"Mother, I didn't mean it that way. I — only ——"

"You did, Laurie. You did because you know. You did, child, because you are right. Because you must be full of God to have known it that way. Go to HIM, Laurie. Find yourself perpetually loved, Daughter. If you can. After your beauty is gone. Sometimes men can love that way — but somehow — our women — we Regans — we haven't been loved that way. I watched, Daughter, and prayed for you all through your engagement that you should be loved that way. It was God's will to show you your way. You are right, Laurie. Go to HIM and keep yourself a perpetual bride. I must write that to Fleta. It will comfort her too. It will make us less selfish. Laurie — our little perpetual bride."

Mother, who was never, except once, to break through the promise of her silence again.

Stella's baby was born. The news came two days after in her handwriting. At first it had seemed incredible, but then Stella was so debonair. It was like her to have a baby one day and write you in big firm script about it the next.

There was something squat and full of sinew about Stella.

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You somehow thought of generations of the lugging peasant women of middle Europe when you saw her. One shoulder a trifle higher than the other, as from the immemorial gesture of water-lugging.

Yes, it was like Stella to have a baby like that, with the ease of having paused for it in the day's work of threshing in the field.

Frank and Stella had a son. It made you feel odd sitting there with the letter in your lap. . . . Something smote you. Something a little terrifying. Something too minute and too inarticulate to carry to confession, or even to Mother Agatha.

Wonder of Stella, whose breasts were become literal fountains of life . . . and you with the letter in your empty lap.

You remembered your visit to Albany when Bobbie was born. The beauty of Fleta as she lay with his pulling lips draining their life and their sustenance from her. The beauty of Fleta giving life with her life and literally the blood of her veins in the flow of warmth down the throat of suckling little greedy Bobbie.

And now here was Stella come into her miracle. The miracle that you had only remotely sensed in the mash of kisses against your eyes. The miracle that you must find for yourself spiritually.

You, Laura Regan, HIS bride, for whom HE would cause to flow the milk of human kindness, to all HIS sucklings, sitting there with the open letter in your lap feeling sick with that fleeting shimmer against your eyes. . . .

"Beloved, help me to understand the glory of motherhood to all children. Help me to be worthy to walk out among them — all children — on the feet You have made whole by causing Your Light to shine. Beloved, whose eyes have opened upon me, if I am weak — help me to be strong —"

The Max. The two lit lamps of the open eyes shining at you from above the glass dish of the lopping-over pansies. There

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was something almost too private and too precious about the soaking kind of light that streamed from them.

There must be some way to prostrate yourself sufficiently before the ecstasy of an unnamable dimension. It would have been a relief to hack at your flesh with blunt things, to feel the scrape of sackcloth against your fine grain, to find HIS feet and kiss them until the very bones burst through your gums.

Fanatical splendor of the frenzy. . . .

Even you, who walked toward HIM on such willing feet, must pay for the glory of that goal with the pangs of renunciation. Wise Mother Agatha —

But renunciation of what? Surely of nothing you had ever coveted. HE had kept you free from desire because he had chosen you for the Invitation. That little shimmer across your eyelids. It was merely to bow you with a new humility for daring, even in His image, to approach HIS perfection.

Stella whose breasts were feeling that literal pull from the infant lips that you must feel only spiritually. You, from whom the milk of human kindness must learn to flow to all children. . . .

"Beloved, forgive me! Teach me. Help me. Strengthen me. Even to approach You and to stumble as I am stumbling, is sublime — don't close Your eyes — don't cause Your eyes to close upon me —"

The gripping fear that they might close upon you! Your eyes that were sometimes afraid to lift to the Max in HIS shrine — for fear — for fear. The dragging upward of your look —

There they shone! Open upon you in their tranquillity.

Mother entering must have found you very quiet, because she shook you twice and Stella's letter fluttered to the floor.

Mother too had a letter. From Frank.

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"Laurie, Frank has a little boy. Your Father never opened his lips when I told him. Only nodded that I might go. My boy has a boy. I want to see my boy's boy, Laurie. Take me."

Why, of course you wanted to go. To Frank. To Stella. To rejoice with her in her miracle. . . .

There was not much time to rejoice in the miracle. Stella's baby had been born at home, four weeks prematurely. The turmoil of that flat! The room where Stella lay reminded you of the glimpses of interiors from elevated trains as you sped past.

Lace curtains tied up in knots. Something on the mantel boiling over on an alcohol stove. Someone had knocked over a dressmaker's dummy, so that as you opened the door, you had to climb over the sprawling thing. Water plunging noisily from a faucet into an uncocked bathtub.

Poor Stella. She was not so well as her letter had said. But she was sitting up in an ugly bulbous rocking chair that seemed to tilt her forward and there were enormous pans of darkness under her eyes and her short dark hair was full of clumps from the heavy sweats that were intermittently drenching her.

And there was the baby in her arms. He was not so pretty as Bobbie had been, and with none of the Regan fairness. More of the wild little gypsy darkness to him that was Stella's. And his hands. Why, his hands were like seaweed. Long floating fingers and long skinny legs that kept plunging in a sort of swimming stroke. Almost reluctant little feet, as if fighting back at the first tides of life.

Well, Stella was matter-of-fact enough about her miracle. And Frank, too, assuming the attitude of leaning nonchalantly against every bit of wall he could find for himself, in trousers that had obviously been dragged on over his pajamas and gazing at that sprawling starfish of his infant. Stella, with

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the pans under her eyes and the drenched look to her hair, holding the baby, kicking and sprawling, and the little seaweeds of hands seeming to wave at the approach of Mother.

"See, he knows you, Mother Regan. 'Hello,' he is saying, 'mere mortal. How's my mortal grandma and the mortal lovely aunt?'"

Mother with her instant futilities wanting to cover the waving little legs and her eyes immediately harried-looking, seeking out Frank's to cling there and bring out that look in his face of the clinging burs.

"Don't cover him, Mother Regan. He wants to wave you hello."

"Child, don't hold a baby that way. You will injure his spine."

"Nonsense, that's exercise. Look at your Aunt Laurie, offspring. Why weren't you born a beautiful Regan blond, scorpion you, instead of a dusky Genesee. Wiggle your grandmother a hello."

"His spine . . ."

"Mother Regan, I'm glad you've come. Go over there and tell that handsome blond son of yours to go back to his second act and stop behaving like a dramatized nuisance, himself. Fiction fathers who pace corridors and sniff ether through keyholes are *passé*. He seems still to be suffering the somewhat infantile delusion that babies are served right off stork beaks into fond mammas' tranquil laps. It would have been just that easy, too, if scorpion hadn't made up his mind to arrive four weeks too soon. But, anyway, it shows determination in him. I like them aggressive!"

"She's been through hell, Mother. Hey, you, Laurie — don't start cleaning house that way. That's a tank of oxygen you're lugging. Don't mind the mess. Our nurse received a telegram that her brother is dying, and had to quit the case, and Mother Genesee is out scouting for a new one."

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"If anyone needs the nurse in this family, it's your handsome son, Mother Regan."

"Here, Mother, I'll clear this chair for you. That's all right, you didn't spill it. That's something Mother Genesee put on the alcohol stove for the kid before she went out — I forgot to stir it — give me that stack of dishes, Laurie, I'll carry it out in the kitchen. Watch out there, Mother, that's an ice bag you're sitting on."

So much to be done. Poor Stella pretending that the baby was not underweight and that her fever was not mounting, and that the shame of having Mother come in on all that chaos and of Frank with his trousers yanked on over his pajamas and the baby not bathed, were not driving her to hysterical flippancy.

If only Mother would not putter so, and get in your way with her futile little carrying in and out of a single object and her dusting at the window sill with a towel.

So much to be done and Mother dusting at the window sill with a towel.

Mother and Stella who had nothing to say to each other and Frank with his anxious excited-looking eyes doing things with long reaches and long strides and Mother whose eyes kept seeking his and Frank whose eyes kept blinking hers off.

It was new and exciting and strangely somehow as if you had done it before. Brushing out Stella's damp hair so that it hung in black curtains. Finding out fresh garments from the topsy-turvy drawers of a household that has just been through an emergency. Preparing coffee for Frank. Shutting off noises. The plunging of water from the open faucets. The clickings of the steam radiator. Drawing a tiny tub of water for baby's bath.

You had never really ministered to anyone with your hands. That sprawling nub of infant there in your lap, as you squeezed out a sponge of warm water along him. One sponge of it

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enough to douse his entire little body and the spray of fine curls that came out when you rubbed his head with the damp cloth! You wanted to begin all over again when you had his tiny arms finally tucked into the woolen shirt and his waistband pinned snugly and his sprawling arms into sleeves. You could have tended fifty of the sprawling little nubs. Fifty of the Stellas. So much to be done. Here. Everywhere. Stella with the miracle of her mite of new humanity to be served.

You with the miracle of all humanity to be served!

The tiny spray of curls that came up like mist off the infant head as you rubbed it. The tiny spray of curls that your touch could make rise into mist off the heads of hundreds of babies needing you. Stella's one. HIS hundreds and hundreds of them. Hundreds and hundreds to be tended in HIS name. It made you work quickly and softly.

Service. The thrill of it kept you kissing into the little crevices of infant neck and arms.

It made you forget the tension. The tension of Mother trying there, in a prim, thin-lipped way, to talk to Stella. And Frank, who seemed to wear this tawdry environment as comfortably as an old hat. . . .

Here you were . . . being needed.

Mother was making Stella cry. It wasn't like Stella to cry. It was the weakness. You could see her wanting terribly not to cry and Frank standing over her with his hands clenched and the old look of the horse with the laid-back ears and the quivering nostrils out in his face. You hated to see the look that he had worn all those years at home, out again now — for the first time — since. And yet, on the other hand, Mother's eyes kept making you want to cry. They clung so. They smeared over tortured Frank with all their faded blueness.

"Frank's father is an old man now. Miss Stella. Stella! He's too stiff and too proud and too stubborn and too sick to

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ask, but it is hard for him to have to see everything in strange hands — his business — his — son ——”

The absolutely cold eyes that Mother turned upon Stella. When they looked at her they were not at all the eyes that clung so.

They were the ice-blue eyes of the enemy!

Mother's cold blue animosity against this girl who had taken Frank, and who now was owning this nub of humanity that was part of Frank.

Mother with her futile-shaped back and eyes that could water and plead so, sitting there cold and blue, hating Stella.

“Mother dear!” you cried, and held out your armful of the nub of their baby. Stella's and Frank's. But Mother too cold and too bitter to take the flesh of her flesh, sitting there the very second day that it was born, wrangling over it.

“Frank's place is at the head of his father's business. This is no environment for him. How do you think it must feel for a mother, whose son has been reared in a home like his, to find him here, in this!”

“Mother — oh, Mother!”

“I can't help it. Frank married Stella to do the right and the honorable thing by her. Now she must do the right and honorable thing by him.”

You thought you had never seen a face look so as if it had been struck, as Frank's did then.

“It is enough that we are willing to let bygones be bygones and accept and forget. You owe it to your child here, to permit your husband to return to his responsibilities. Frank, come home. Why should your sister Fleta's child have a fortune settled on him by your father and Bobbie probably to get one later, and yours lies here — in this? Frankie, come home. Your father is old and paralyzed and sitting there every day deep in his misery and his stubbornness . . . he's your father, Frank.”

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"And I'm his wife, Mother Regan. And his interests are as much mine as they are yours. More. Because his poverty is my poverty. This may be all that it appears to you. Poor and messy — and worse than either of those. Sordid. But in spite of that, the months he has lived in it are the first happy ones Frank has ever known. Look at him. Did your son ever look like that before he came out of that great solemn prison of Eighty-second Street into sunlight? Look at him — did he ever look like that before?"

Stella in a blaze of triumph and some of the conscious cruelty of woman to woman.

"Frankie is in a stupor. He's like those men who go to the South Sea Islands ——"

"Mother, that's not true. I'm working. And harder than I have ever worked in my life."

"Mother Regan, can't you see? Can't you? Frank wasn't made to dicker around in square feet of lumber. Frank's is a big talent! He hasn't found himself yet. All those years of inhibition and floundering and — yes, I will say it — all those years of his childhood and boyhood and manhood in that prison on Eighty-second Street have claimed their toll!"

Stella was right — oh, but Stella was right ——

"Even Laurie, here, with all her adoration and all her emotion for him hasn't ever shared Frank's mental experiences. He's had to fight through the crises of his intellectual life — his intellectual curiosity and his intellectual awakenings, alone. Or until I came. I must say it again, Mother Regan. Until I came and he found someone who spoke the same language. Mother Regan, Frank's never been free, never been happy until now. Look at his face. Don't come here to threaten him with the shades of the prison house again."

Stella was right. Stella was right. You knew it exultantly but somehow inside of you tears were running — tears were running for Mother.

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"Mother, try to see Stella's point. I've lived in hell until now. Narrow bigotry is what Father has tried to impose upon me ever since I was old enough to dread it and to loathe it; Father is not a religious soul like Laurie here who has genuine faith because she has not intellectual misgivings and because she thinks with her emotions. Laurie is the ethical and spiritual result of a capacity for faith. But Father — Father isn't religious. Father is just a creedist. Father goes to mass and pays his dues and gives memorial stained-glass windows because he is part of a system into which he has been born. And he's been a creedist in everything. He's tried to make us conform to his creed for us. His surface creed, I should say. God knows he has allowed himself his private license!"

"Frank!"

"Well, I don't think with my emotions, Mother. I've asked questions. And those questions about my home and my Church — well, those questions, locked up there in the prison of my environment where even thinking them was heresy, made life a torment. That's what Stella's done for me, Mother. This sordid flat, as you call it, is my mental gymnasium. I can think here. Write here. Be happy here. Be free here — Mother ——"

Almost Frank might have added, be free of you, Mother! Because you saw his eyes in their old, old way trying to be free. Free of the pathos of the devastated look in Mother's washed-out ones. The same old desperate look of trying to evade Mother's capacity for getting on your nerves and getting on your pity.

"I never thought, Frankie, that my son would be satisfied to sit back at what he calls his vocation, and let his women-folks earn the living for him. It's not a fine sight to see my son living off a woman seamstress and a stenographer."

Oh! Oh! Oh! Mother, to have been cunning enough to find the one wedge in.

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"Not even your Father would let his women do that for him, Frankie." Mother cunningly, oh, so cunningly, pursuing her advantage.

"I tell you it's like what they say of those South Sea Islands, Frank. To come here and find you like this. Dressed like this. Living like this. Here — in this mess — not minding — and letting the women — the seamstress and — stenographer — earn your —"

"Mother Regan — Mother Regan — how could you be so cruel even to think, much less to say it to him!"

"Because it is true! Frankie, whether your wife realizes it or not, you owe it to her and your baby and yourself — to get into a man's business and earn a man's living for your child's education. Bring your family home, Frank. Stella, his father is a stern man but he has had a lesson. He won't be the one to ask him to come home twice. But he needs his son. He's old and lonely and paralytic. His big interests mustn't scatter. Frankie can write on the side. His father will be more lenient. He knew when we left the house to-day we were coming here and he wouldn't have allowed it if he wasn't getting lenient. Don't take my boy's future, you. I'm afraid of the new will. He's arranged it so that if he should be the first of us to go, there is no way I could fix it for Frank to come into his inheritance. Stella — you — his wife — send my boy home . . . it will be easier for you too —"

The steady eyes of Stella Regan and the way her lips had of curling like flame.

"Frank and I and baby aren't afraid of poverty. Neither are we quite so badly off as you see us now. I've studied and speeded up my short-hand since we're married. Frank is above the petty medieval legend that a man must necessarily be the breadwinner for the family, even if it happens to be the woman best fitted for it. I've the practical head of this family on my shoulders. I'm going to earn the bread to feed

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talent. We don't need his father's wealth. We need our youth and our enthusiasm and thank God we've got both. Frank, you explain to your mother that you are above that old social-inheritance idea that the man must be the breadwinner."

The blue burs. It was horrible to see Frank's face twitching of them. It was as if when Stella called his name she was shaking him — out of the trance of them.

"Frank?"

"I know, Stella, you're right of course. Only now — seeing you so done up — and now the kid! After all, how do I know that I'm not sacrificing you and the youngster to some strange mirage I see on the horizon? What if ——"

Cunning of Mother!

"Frankie, your father will be softer now. You can write on the side, but you cannot support a family on it!"

"Then *I'll* support it, Mother Regan. Until he can. And he can. Give him time."

"Laurie," Frank's eyes cried, Frank's eyes turning toward you. Help me ——

You — sitting there with the nub of baby, silent amid all the wrangle. You from whom the crawl of Mother's eyes had turned now to Frank. Mother fighting against her aloneness. Mother at whom nobody ever looked, fighting not to be left alone.

"Laurie," cried Frank's eyes. "Help me." And somehow, sitting there, you didn't help, but remained in a silence that gave Mother more and more the cunning assurance of her advantage.

"Frankie — come home?"

"No, Mother Regan, he cannot!"

"Laurie, Laurie," cried Frank's eyes to you. And there you continued to sit seeing him hypnotized into pity by the futility watering out of Mother's eyes.

You knew! The secret little relief that made you sit there

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abetting Mother's advantage with your silence. If Frank returned home, it would be easier for you! Easier for you to shake off the cling of Mother's eyes. It would save you the horror of abandoning her to her aloneness. It would be easier for you to leave her. For the Church!

"Frank," you cried, as if your words ran before you like a brood of frightened chickens that had hopped right off your silence. "Frankie, Mother needs you so."

"Oh, Laurie — you — his sister —"

"But, Laurie, now that you're well again — and this affair, as I understand it, all off with Dud — Mother has you at home."

And then the rushing, the rushing of Mother's tears breaking once more through the promise of silence.

"Mother hasn't, Mother hasn't! Mother hasn't anybody. Laurie — tell him."

"Mother — please — not — now!"

"Tell him. Tell him. I can't stand the silence of it any longer. It's eating me up. Tell them why I haven't got you."

"Is it on again between you and Dud, Laurie?"

"No, Frankie — no — sometimes I wish it were that!"

"Mother!"

"I do. I do. That's natural. That's being a woman."

"What's all this, Laurie?"

"Frankie, your sister is going to enter the convent! You used to tease her so with being a little nun, and now it's come. I'm not complaining. It's God's way. But I never dreamed, in raising my children to be religious in a God-fearing way, I was driving one of them out of the Church and the other one into it. Frankie, can you realize it? Our Laurie is going to be a nun. She's already on probation —"

On probation! You through whom had just crawled the desire to shield yourself with Frank. Ruthlessly. To thrust

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him between you and the clinging of Mother's eyes. You had violated your probation!

"Good Lord, Laurie, if I were Mother I'd take you over my knee and spank you. What's the headline idea? *DISAPPOINTED IN LOVE, BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER OF MILLIONAIRE LUMBERMAN RENOUNCES WORLD FOR CONVENT!*"

You just sat and just looked at Frank with the old sense of drowning futility you used to endure when he read you his Hegel, his Kant and his Spencer. What had seemed to you the little pebbles of men's reasoning over which your emotion thundered like seas — scattering the pebbles. Frank among his pebbles. You with the mystery of the roaring of the sea.

"I refuse to discuss it here and now," you said, coldly, and trying to appear as if the little prickles were not racing all over you, the prickles of the futility of trying to make anyone but God know what was in your heart. . . .

You were going to cry. You felt it and kept tensing your throat. Frank, whom you loved even with the raging of the sea between you. And Stella with him too, on the other side, there among the pebbles, regarding you with eyes that were so much wiser than yours and so much more restless.

"Oh, oh, oh," they seemed to say to you, "silly little nin-compoop!" And Frank's favorite expression for you "Darling little Dumb-bell." Dumb-bell.

Were you? Were you? You whose neck ached so over Kant and Hegel. Were you?

"You see, Frank. You see. Mother hasn't anybody. . . ."

"Laurie, is it possible you're serious? Do you realize what you're doing? You're putting yourself on the plane with the women who quit life because they haven't the guts to face it. Those, and glorified servant girls are the nuns! No woman with an ounce of brains is going to waste them in a convent.

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It is the last resource of the ignorant and the disappointed. Good God, Laurie, you may be the latter, but don't be both. Dudley isn't the last man in the world. Don't, in the name of disappointed love, go mewling about, trying to wipe little children's noses, and suffer little prostitutes to come unto you. Buck up, Laurie. You're so blooming lucky to have your legs back that you ought to be out now, fox-trotting with them. Spank her, Ma. That's about the only way to reason with anyone idiotic enough to want to be a nun."

Frank there — so on the outside that your eyes filled for him and Stella — and Mother too.

"But why all the argument when it is all settled?" you cried, feeling the smile come out all over your face and drawing it in again because it came from the something in you that made you want to wipe the noses of the children and suffer the prostitutes to come unto you. "I've even chosen my order. I'm entering House of Mercy!"

There was a startler for them! Not even Mother knew that.

"Good God!" said Frank.

Good God. Good God. The countless times Frank's sayings that had gone through you in hot needles. Good God! Frank, to whom HE was not Good God at all. You wanted to jerk the phrase angrily off his lips. The poor hurt phrase.

Good God. How beautiful it could be when it came up off your heart and off your lips in incense. Poor Frank. It was ridiculous, though, feeling sorry for him who was feeling sorry for you.

"Oh, Laura, oh, Laura," cried Stella, "how can you! How can you be the sister of your brother and be silly enough to want to fling yourself into that morass of stupidity, the convent! Have you ever looked at the faces of nuns? Hypnotized little full-moons. What kind of renunciation is it that seeks its refuge in dodging life? If you want to work for your God,

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go out and do your chore toward carrying on the well-known human race. Mate up with it and bear children and have the courage to endure the tyrannies of human ties. Anybody can dodge them. If you are so crazy about your God, prove it by facing HIS music."

Poor Stella, there was fever in her eyes and you wanted to press your cool hands against them.

"If I were God, and anybody were to come sniveling and hanging on my apron strings instead of getting out and carrying on his part in the universe I had laid out for him, I'd put him pretty far down to the foot of the human class, I would. There's God for you, right there in my kid. If there is any meaning to the scheme of things, there it is, in your arms, Laurie. Do your share. You're trying to dodge the labor pains of life."

"All women aren't made to propagate."

"I agree with you, although, biologically speaking, I suppose all those who don't, are nature's wastage. But at least if you don't marry, Laurie, don't run away from it to the convent. There's a whole new world of work to-day, waiting to be done by women. Don't be wastage."

"Drone bees in the hive aren't wastage. They do their share in their active world. They carry on."

"No, but the peeved little bees don't run away and wrap themselves in bee wimples and spend their days wiping little bee noses. They carry on."

"Carry-on is right, if what leaks out of the convents occasionally is true. You cannot suppress the instinct of a normal woman, Laurie."

"Normal woman. Has it ever occurred to you that it may be normal for me to live the cloistered life? All my existence I seem to have been trying to force myself to be what you call a normal woman. Apparently being what is normal for you, is being what is abnormal for me. If I am what you call me —

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languid adolescent — then God made me that way — that I might serve *Him*."

"Rot. Go have children for Him if you're so bent on serving."

"For every one woman who serves HIM my way, there are millions to serve *Him* that way!"

"But, Laurie ——"

"I tell you — leave me be! You! All of you! All the years of indecisions — and the sufferings — I won't be dragged back into them. The pull between wanting to be what you call a normal woman and my desire to serve *Him* and *Him* alone. With my hands. Yes, and to wipe the little noses of children and to suffer the prostitutes to come unto me."

"All of which can be accomplished without ——"

"I'm a nun by talent, I tell you. Just as you have talent for writing, I have it for the convent. Ever since — ever since — remember, Frank — Nun among the Lilies ——"

"Oh, God! As if you'd let me forget it."

"It seems to me now that I look back — since that afternoon — I — oh, I haven't any illusions about the hardships. I'm going to help *Him* keep house just as Stella is helping you. Can't you see — you — you — all — must you be in the Light like me in order to be able to see — can't I help you — can't I make you understand ——"

"Tommyrot. Stuff. Nonsense. You're a baby. You've never been awakened. Dudley wasn't your man. That's all. Good God, Laurie, you're not fit to go into a convent. You're a sleeping beauty. Why, you're not even sure the stork didn't bring that youngster there. There ought to be some kind of jurisdiction over girls entering the convent too young or too ignorant. Just as there is for the protection of street-walkers and dope fiends. You're in a trance. You're a sleeping beauty. Wake up. Your God gives His best women to men. Not to the Church. You're just about due for an awakening, after

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you've let yourself in for this fanatical nun business, and then — hell to pay!"

As if you had not already been through the secret conflict. It made you a little ashamed, sitting there to Frank's bland indictment of never having awakened. The hot mash of kisses along your eyelids. The line of little thrill along your being as you had sat so often beside Dudley. Even back there in your little girlhood, the time you had brushed past Ashfurth Ropps in the hallway — how poignantly even now you could remember that. You who knew that mysterious raising of the very nap of your flesh — how to make them understand that there is a kind of ecstasy that transcends even ecstasy of the flesh. . . .

You knew the futility, the overwhelming futility of trying to make Frank see with his reason what you could only feel in the hot flush around your heart. Frank, or Stella with her eyes so crowded up with her own image which she beheld in her infant, or Mother, full of her strange dual reluctance to give you to God or man. You knew the futility and so you rose, feeling yourself slim and the turn of your neck white as it came out of the sheer little collar of your black dress. You knew with every inch of you the beauty of you standing there. The beauty that was HIM. But what you said was:

"Come, Mother," and began tying her feather boa about her neck and gathering up the odds and ends of scarf and then stooping over baby. To wipe his nose! You did it with your fribble of handkerchief, pinching the little white nub into the cambric.

How you all laughed. Mother with the tears dimming her eyes that were already so dim from dim living. Frank with his arm thrown across Stella and again Mother who could not keep her tortured gaze from off the gesture.

"Frankie ——"

"Now, now, Mother. This is all nonsense. Laurie is going

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through her spiritual measles and whooping-cough phase, or whatever phase it is girls out of love go through."

It was strange how Mother knew, though. She had the look of drowning back there behind her tears and there were you all, being tortured at the spectacle. Even Stella, her own gaze so big in her pale face, riveted to Mother from above the bald little dome of her infant head.

"Frankie, come home. Laurie is going. It's in her face. Can't you see it? It's God's way. I dare not hold her back from serving God."

It was a matter of shushing and quieting Mother in her terrible futility and Mother, knowing that in her weakness lay her strength, sucking Frank down into the drown of her eyes. Sucking Frank down — sucking you down — Under-tow.

You kept dragging Mother toward the door. All the little secret selfish reasons for wanting Frank back home were running from under you like sand. For shame and for another such ridiculous reason. The ridiculous reason of Frank's forelock!

Frank standing there in the sordid mess of that room. A baby blanket hanging on a cord stretched from mantel to chair. A baby scale on a table that must have been stacked with Frank's writing materials because they were shoved back. Stella with her damp, docked hair and in her curiously unmaternal garb of an orange smock, holding her baby a little carelessly. The clutter of sunlight. Something untidy about the very way that brief sunlight littered the room. And then Frank with his forelock dangling down over his eyes. The forelock that Father hated so. The forelock that Frank always paused, outside a door at home, to fling back before entering a room. Frank with his shirt open at the neck and that forelock down.

Suddenly what mattered more than anything else was that

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forelock. Down! Not Father's way. Frank's way! The baby threatened to have a forelock too. The merest little curlicue one that Stella already had a habit of winding around her finger to train it down. Its way. Its natural little way of growing down. Father would want it up in bristles. Like his. A short harsh scrub brush. His way.

You wanted that forelock down.

And suddenly Mother with her eyes that were sucking in Frank seemed predatory. Something that would eat its young. And Father unseen, back there in his lair, waiting to devour his young. And you! You, who were on probation — with HIM — you wanting Frank back in the home so that you — you might be free to tear off the burs from your flesh of Mother's eyes. . . .

The inviolable rights of parenthood. How inviolable were they? Greedy Mother, with eyes that dug — did mere parenthood give them the right to these young three here — the eager superb vagabondage of Frank and Stella who were in danger of surrender? . . .

"Mother," you cried, because even Stella's eyes were drowning eyes and Frank's forelock kept waving at you like a signal — "how dare you!"

"Frankie — come —"

"Stella!" you shouted, as if you were warning her out of the way of a runaway horse — "Stella!" And began bundling and shoving and guiding Mother in her feather boa out through the narrow foyer into the hallway of the pressed leatheret walls and down two flights of fireproof stairs with perambulators on the landings and through her bewildered remonstrances, out into the crowded Harlem streets.

Stella and Frank and the baby must be saved from Mother who was predatory and Father who was waiting in his lair.

The being happy. You awoke to it and it sent you to sleep.

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It ran right through the gloom of the big house in Eighty-second Street.

It ran right over the heart-clutching little silent way Mother had as she moved about the house. Always close to the walls. Mother always walked close to the walls. Over the consciousness of Father, broodier than ever down in his improvised office before the green top desk.

Father seldom talked any more. Not even to you. The telephone too was no longer used, but all day the messengers from the Yards kept coming and departing, and Doheny, who had taken Frank's place, dashing constantly up in a small red roadster that looked like a fire chief's.

That was for speed. To speed Doheny from the Yards for Father's orders and back again.

Sometimes Father let you slip around to his knee and sit there as you used to, while he sorted, with his poor fumbling fingers, among the papers, and Victor hovered, but afraid to offer assistance.

You knew of course, with an ache for him, why Father said less and less. So little that sometimes when Doheny came and Father began to get red around the ears with the mounting anger, you were always sent from the room before the wordless torrent broke.

You knew why, too. Father's speech was thickening so that not even you could often understand any more; so that the words got all clogged and mixed in his throat like a traffic in a fog. It was terrible to hear them jam there in a sort of gargle. And Father didn't want you to know. He was fierce with not wanting you to know and so you had to talk to him softly and constantly about all the little things that he had always listened to when they came from you. But so constantly that there was no time for pauses or else you were slid from his knee and beckoned out.

Talk of the sweater you were knitting to send Bennet. Tom-

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tit, your canary, was molting. Mother Agatha was going to ask Mother Dominici if you might not bring it to House of Mercy with you. Not for your very own of course. But to hang in the infirmary. Mother Dominici of House of Mercy was so beautiful and so calm. Oh, Father, every week, when you had your talks with her in the little whitewashed room outside the chapel at House of Mercy, why, afterward when you walked home again through the park, it sounded a little silly to say it — but after one of the talks with Mother Dominici, walking home — alone — you felt so sorry, Father — so sorry for everybody who wasn't you. You, Laura Regan. The bride. HIS.

Sometimes you dared to put it that way to Father. Discreetly. Even slyly. It suggested to Father exactly what you intended it should. Laura Regan. Bride of Him. Every time you put it that way to Father, the cunning look came out in his face. Men were not to have the morsel of you. God was someone remote and grand and the finest families in the land gave up their daughters to the Church. . . .

At least men were not to have the morsel of you. You knew, somehow, the wisdom of inciting Father to that thought.

Fleta had written you:

" . . . I keep reading your letter and rereading. And the marvel is, a thunderbolt has fallen and I don't feel surprised. I don't know whether the rest of the family had my feeling about you. But I've always had the strangest sense that you were a sort of a loan exhibit, darling. When you became engaged, it seemed so unreal. Your ever being engaged to Dudley. Your ever being engaged to anybody for that matter. But to Dudley of all men. Just a regular, beefy, everyday fellow like him. Laurie, I can't make up my mind. I don't know whether I'm sadder than I ever have been, or happier. But one thing I do know, Laurie. Whether or not I understand the motive that impels women to turn to the Church, thank God for this, Laurie. No man is going to have you. I can't help it. I know the world is full

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of men who are worthy, even of you, but God would not snatch you from that happiness if HE saw it there for you. If there ever was anyone, Laurie, sweet enough and pure enough to serve God, it is my little sister. . . ."

Dear Fleta.

Dear Father. Poor Father and Fleta. You prayed for them so constantly. There were tapers that you had lighted burning in St. Xavier's for them every day and every night, little secret prayer tapers. . . .

Ever since you could remember there had been secret prayer tapers that you had lighted burning in that chapel. It was like carrying around a little Christmas tree in your heart. All lighted. And that nobody knew about but you. The tapers you had burned for Mary Walsh and Jerry. For Father and Frank and Kate and the servant girls in chapel who sobbed and sniveled. . . .

You tried once to tell Father about the tapers. It was your way of trying to get said to him that not one of the busy days ahead of you in convent service would be without its taper for him.

It gave you the most indescribable sense of snugness.

The thought of you — serving HIM — gliding into the chapel at House of Mercy, which was the shape of a passion cross and placed due east and west, to light a taper for Father. And pray for him. You could feel the wimple too. You could feel it prop your chin. It made a little round window out of which your face, if it became clear enough with God, could shine.

You were glad the nuns at House of Mercy wore brown. Somehow, so strangely, it took away your sense of corporeal weight, to imagine yourself hurrying softly through the corridors in brown. The Magdalens wore black. You wanted to bend over them. Brown. The days would be full of soft hurryings. With little of the placidity of the secluded orders.

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Someone would always be needing you somewhere. The little nuns hurrying about the city in twos. The little perpetual brides. Brown little crouch of you, lighting the taper and praying for Father. . . .

It was hard trying to tell Father about the taper. In fact, you never got it said, because as you started every time, his knee stiffened and slid you off.

But one day something happened and you were ashamed because the pain of it smote you almost before the joy of it. The pain of Father's having forced himself to have the grace to do it. The pain of your pity for him. You could see him with his thick stubby clubs of fingers and his lower lip pursed out, writing it for you.

That was a check for five thousand dollars made out to House of Mercy in the morning mail for you.

Coming that silent ungracious way. Coming in the way, that made you know you dare not thank him for it. Just the folded check. Father's way. The way that somehow seemed to have landed him so grimly in that basement office, with the incandescent bulb burning into gloom and all the sunlight flooding outside. Father, who could have had any room in the house. Even a glassed-in conservatory on the roof like the old Ropps house opposite, down there, instead, like a mole, within the hole of himself.

You wanted to find your way in. To burrow your way into where Father must be full of torture — down there within the hole of himself.

"Beloved — help me — to help Father. . . ."

You couldn't help, that day as you set out with the precious check in your purse, for your weekly talk with Mother Dominici, feeling just a little sorry again for everybody.

Chiefly because they were not you.

The people you passed in the park as you went in little mashes right through the flurries of lovely gilt-colored autumn

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leaves. Most of them did not know. Their faces were like dim lanterns hunting around. Bobbing around in a bog. The bog that had to be got through somehow. The bog of being without God.

The faces one passed. Some full of bewilderment. Some dumb with acceptance. Some full of resentment. Then some — they were the faces that made you sorriest — the faces that were like Frank's. The faces that were wise and bitter and nervous and intellectual with doubt.

The faces for whom the little interval between birth and death was like an angle between two spokes in the wheel of a system. The system they accounted for with some of Frank's and Stella's high-sounding phrases from Huxley and Spencer and Darwin and Hegel.

They were the saddest faces of all. The faces that were too wise to know the tranquillity of faith. The faces that could explain everything except the mystery of the before life and the after life and therefore the faces that could explain nothing. . . .

There was so much to be done. So much. So much. You who had the meaning. All the faces that were smeared with the doubts, to be led back to the miracle of faith . . . the world of faces in torment that had dropped the cake of its faith for what it had seen reflected in the troubled waters stirred up by the Huxleys and Spencers . . . the fear that for those faces there was no turning back.

So much to be done. No wonder you hurried. You wanted to be hurrying in your wimple — two of you — always the cozy brown little two of you — out to the bobbing faces in the bog — to show them the way —

That was what made the days of the probation seem sometimes so long. It was like waiting to don the official uniform of God.

It was hard, though, not to run through those days. The

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days that led to HIM. The days that should have shone. Only sometimes they were not shining at all. But could turn into bog. The bog with all the lantern faces bobbing about and your own face befuddled among them.

It made the days of the probation full of a certain kind of terror. Sometimes the Eyes of the Max could seem to dim. You knew it must be because your own were dim and that was frightening.

It was hard sometimes not to lie in the snuggle of yourself — mornings — full of the old, the purring sense of your beauty. The little rose points of your flesh when your eyes glanced down. Sometimes in the very act of Adoration, your eyes, glancing down, would snag on the little rose points of your flesh. The pinks that you could sometimes feel out in glows over your cheek bones. The glow came up into your eyes and suddenly your exaltation could be the exaltation of the flesh. Those were the days when HE could seem terrifyingly dim and you in the bog — the bog of the rosy flesh.

Sometimes, too, the chapel that could exalt you until the flesh rang like a bell, could slap you with its cold stone walls until the tingling all died down.

The color of your early mornings when you awoke for early mass. Dun color.

The convent mornings would all be like that.

It was like tearing the flesh off a block of ice to which you had frozen, to step out mornings into the chill of your own room, with the white fur rug gone and even the cheval mirror blank.

Often in the morning like this, when you turned, all goose-fleshed, to the Eyes of the Max — there they were, a little down at you, with the quiver across the lids — leaving you in bog.

“Beloved, where are you?”

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Those were the stern days of the probation. The frightening days. The days you carried to confession. To Mother Agatha. To Mother Dominici. The days you shivered at mass. The days that the black serge of your dress scratched you. The days that had no reality except the taste of good warm milk the way it ran thick and sweet along your throat, or the comfort of your open fireplace. The days that the feel of your own contour was urn-shaped. The soft little ride of your breasts against the irritation of the serge.

The outline of the convent that could rise before your very sleep. There had lain, ever since you could remember, somewhere just under your sleep, a consciousness of a convent on some Fiesole hill. Sometimes so real that it almost seemed a memory. As if you had been there before. A hilltop like St. Vincent's. Only flowery and with walls wavy with lichen and flagstone, paths worn down thin as glass by saintly feet, that led through a cloister to Mary in a niche in a garden wall that was always hot with sun. . . .

You would lie just under sleep and smell its bugin villæ and taste its warmth.

House of Mercy stood like a foundry, harsh and red brick, along among the coal yards, ice houses, truck-horse stables and silent breweries that bordered East River.

There were no gardens at House of Mercy, only brick courts that smelled of iodoform, and once a young girl who had just been committed for "soliciting" had flung herself out of the second-story window of the infirmary which bordered this court and died with the brains literally tumbling out of her poor broken head. . . .

The charwomen in the disinfected smelling blue uniforms, who carried slops and swabbed floors at House of Mercy, were mostly prostitutes who had been redeemed for service, many of them with healed sores on their faces and gums that were too soft to hold teeth. There had been a smallpox epidemic

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one winter. Not a nun had flinched. Mother Dominici's face was full of the markings.

Sometimes, listening to Mother Dominici who talked to you of Him and then turned and gave an order about soft soap, nausea came over you in waves. Nausea of the flesh. Nausea for the soft soap and the pock markings and the senile gums. Yes, even for fat dear holy Mother Dominici herself, who lived with God and who knew to the tin how many cans of His corn were stacked up in the storeroom to be doled out to His regenerates.

Nun among the Lilies. You wanted to walk through that kind of beauty toward Him.

The corridors of House of Mercy smelt of roach disinfectant and of service. The service of slops and lysol for unclean bodies and cots that were always being lugged to and fro. The nuns themselves, tilting the heavy cotton mattresses, kicking their skirts back out of the way and jerking caught cords and dangling rosaries from getting caught in tight places.

Your hands that were full of the impulse for service. You wanted to send them out — white wings, to the Magdalens. But not to touch their scabs. Not that! You tried, sitting there beside Mother Dominici, to capture the old ecstasy. And sometimes it came. And then again only the nausea — the waves of nausea. . . .

Once crossing the park, something curious happened. A motor car with that tilted look of great speed and a wind-shield shaped like the spectacles of some dinosaur, whizzed around a curve with a yowl of siren, so that with one foot off the curb you drew it back again startled.

In the blur and in the blast of horn, the same old maniacal one with three hiccups and a bleat, two heads turned at you and were gone again off around another curve.

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They were Dudley and Miss MacAfee! Dudley with his teeth bare and his chin almost touching the wheel. Miss MacAfee's hair was bobbed. You saw it boldly in the flash of a second. It had stood out in the wind. A red wig on a pole! An impudent red wig on a pole. You felt your underlip trembling and the park getting wavy through tears. Tears of affront. To have ripped past you, so that you had to step back out of the way, and left dangling before you the red wig on a pole. You wanted to shake Dudley. And for nothing. For nothing except the flare of Miss MacAfee's hair out in the wind. The same wind that had used to toss yours. You cried a little and you prayed a little and finally before you reached House of Mercy, you were able to giggle a little.

"Beloved, Beloved. Forgive. It was her hair — the red — somehow the red of it — flying back. Like a taunt. Forgive me, Beloved. Bless them. Bless them both and teach them to walk in the shadow of Your perfection — and me — Beloved — teach me to walk there. . . ."

Fleta was home. She and the children arrived one evening while you were sitting in Father's office, reading him the stock reports before Victor led him off to the vibratory machine and bed. The dry click of Mother's knitting needles came from the dining room where she worked with her poverty-colored yarns to the high remote bulb of the chandelier and Kate padding in and out, clearing the dinner table.

Evening after evening, as you sat thus and read Father the stock quotations while Victor sat by and pored over the pages of motion-picture magazines, you had the feeling of all of you sitting there immersed in a cistern of cold tea. Weak tea.

The evenings were that color. One bulb burning in each room. Ever since you could remember, Father, who would

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think nothing of signing his name to checks during the day that aggregated thousands and tens of thousands, had stormed about the electric-light bills.

Now that his speech was so thick, he merely got red and waved them about when they came.

It was bad for Father to get red. Sometimes, with that in mind, you undressed in the dark and all through the house, evenings, were the little off-and-on clicks. No one left a room even to answer the telephone, without first clicking off the light. Ever since you could remember, the evenings had been nicked with these clickings.

Poor Kate. For years every click had been followed by the trail of her mutterings. She was forever stubbing her toe in the dark pantry. And then clicking on and clicking off again. Frank had used to stamp out, evenings, over to Ashfurth Ropps, where the lights burned with reckless prodigality, even while the family slept.

Anywhere to be rid of the clicks.

You hated them too. It was as if through all the years a little bit of your flesh had been pinched in each click. . . . Little pinches of pity for Father, who was mean about light. . . .

When Fleta came home that night, another one of the pinches went through you. She must have let herself in with her old latchkey. You saw her first from where you sat, coming down the stairs, the boys at her skirts, and her hat, as usual, too far back on her dear mussed head and the high nervous color out in her cheeks.

She was so like a wraith to you in your surprise, that when she disappeared for a moment, you could not be sure that you had seen her.

She had made the dash back, to turn out the upper-hall light after her!

Fleta with the high nervous spots out in her cheeks, turning

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back to click out the lights. Oh, Fleta dearest. It pinched your heart so, the terrible meekness of that.

You were the first to greet her. Noisily. For fear of Father who might not greet her at all.

"Fleta! Boys! Surprise. Mother, Father — it's Fleta come home." Bennet who looked like Father, standing there with his little hung-on head. Bobbie, little Regan, hurling himself against you.

There went Mother's hand toward her handkerchief, which she wore tucked into the edge of her bodice. That eternal gesture of Mother about to cry.

"Father — just see — Bennet's here ——"

But Fleta had the center of the floor. Right the very center of the weak-tea cistern. What she had to say she must have been repeating all the way on the train. It had the unmistakable sound of being recited.

For the moment, after Fleta had cleared her throat and thrust her soft heavy self forward with the most appealing attempt at bravado, you thought you were going to laugh. And did. A great hysterical splotch of it that no one noticed.

"I've left Quin this time. For good. You mustn't ever ask me to go back. I'll kill myself first — Father — so help me, Mother of God."

Fleta's voice slipping up. Getting away from her after all the rehearsal. And there it was down again. Good Fleta. "It doesn't matter why I left home. It isn't so very different this time from the others — except — I've finished. I won't go back, Father. Something in me this time won't let me go, ever! Mind that. If you don't want us to stay, you can say so now, and we'll go away. But not back."

Fleta's courage was the courage of one a little crazy with desperation. "I don't want divorce, if that's what you're thinking. There isn't anything I ever want to be free for. That way. I only want peace. And my boys. He has a

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woman now, I can tell you that, for keeps. He's red-eyed crazy over her. That part is finished for me. Father, may we come home?"

"Father, Father, take Fleta home," cried Mother, and clapped her hands to her lips to keep back the rising sounds.

"Grandpa," shouted Bobbie, who was naughty and badly trained, and ever so beautiful, "take us home, Pa's no good. Pa has petting parties and makes Ma cry."

"Father — welcome Fleta. Welcome Fleta and the children home, Father."

Your arm about Fleta had the feeling of growing. Of turning into an arm as thick as a tree bole and you were trembling for what Father might say.

"Beloved, make Father see. Help him. He wants to be helped. Father — poor Father — let Fleta come home — help him, Beloved, to let Fleta come home —"

"Father — since I don't want the divorce — only peace, Father — and my boys —"

"Beloved — help Father to be kind —"

"Grandfather, I got a Indian suit with feathers. . . ."

"Bennet — you tell Grandfather something too," you cried, and pushed him forward.

Bennet with his hung-on face: "A girl in the train, Grandfather — hit me."

"Get their rooms ready," said Father in his poor thick voice. "The second-floor-back ones."

You understood, but Fleta who had not heard the voice since it had thickened so, only stood and stared frightened at the noise he made.

"Father?"

"Yes, Father, I'll get them ready. I'll get them ready."

It made you cry terribly to see Fleta, finally comprehending, drop there at Father's knee to kiss his hands which hung like dumplings, and Mother with her pale eyes looking actually

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white, trying to fold to her Bobbie and Bennet, who held back from her and pushed.

The relief of dashing up to unfold blankets and drag down pillows from high and difficult shelves. The making of beds. Caressing of pillows to curve to the tiredness of Fleta's head. The dashing from pillow to post. The dragging out of cots for Bennet and Bobbie and the staggering with more than your weight could bear.

Once you staggered to your knees under a mattress.

It was easy to stagger under too much weight. Like the nuns in the corridors, tugging the beds. You saw now, how. Labor of love.

The coming of Fleta and the children made it suddenly possible for everything to begin to be definite.

The next week, with the calendar propped between you and Mother Dominici, in the little square room outside the chapel, the date was set. April Fourth.

The very month, the very day, the very hour. So simply. So without ado. So as if that day in April were not to hang ahead of you with a clang. A ringing bell of a day. The day upon which you were to present yourself for your novitiate.

You had never dared to let yourself think of the round hour and day of your going, somehow, before the coming of Fleta into Mother's aloneness.

But there was no wavering this time to the coming home of Fleta. Something about her was final. You marveled.

Packing cases of her things from Albany began to arrive almost immediately. Bennet's bicycle. Trunks of linen and finally Fleta's own circassian walnut bedroom set and Bobbie's mahogany chifferole that Grandmother had given him on his birthday. And, too, the magnificent solid-silver tea service

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with ivory mountings that Father had let you go down and select for his tenth-anniversary gift to Quin and Fleta. There was almost a little spunk mixed up with Fleta's air of finality this time.

She cried a great deal and because her boys were unruly and tore through the halls of the house shouting and sliding down banisters and scoffing furniture, was always cuffing them. But softly, as a bear would her cubs, and the boys fought back at her and kicked and screamed if she captured and tried to hold them in the vise of her arms and Father took to banging his cane on the floor and sending Victor up to Fleta with messages when Bobbie went wild with sliding orgies up and down the slick floors of the hallways.

The very first week, Fleta, surprisingly on her own, and with the air of establishing the finality of her home-coming, arranged for a private kindergarten for Bobbie and was for placing Bennet in Christian Brothers Military Academy, at Greenwich, but nothing would do for Bennet but tutoring at home. Father's cane came down on that.

And so in Father's office there was a table set up and for three hours every morning, Father listened in on Bennet being tutored by a senior from Fordham University. Bennet with his little hung-on head. He was always doing everything just about twice as well as Bobbie and had the affectionate quality about him of wanting to sit on the arm of your chair with his arm across your shoulder and was hungry for the human contact of even a drink of water from your tumbler at the table. And yet it was Bobbie against whose little face Fleta would crush most of her unhappy kisses. Cuffing him the very next minute and then holding him passionately while he wriggled and kicked against her, actually seeming to kiss the very cuffs she had given him.

It was as if the child rebelled against Fleta's inefficiency with him. He bit at her and tore at her as if in rage at her

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impotence and could frighten poor Fleta into a panic of beating and kissing him by holding his breath until his face, so adorable in its yellow of square-cut bang and bob, purpled and then bulged.

Bennet could watch these performances, especially the kissings, with his little face as bleak-looking as a crag.

And Father would watch Bennet. Bitter for him in the way that you knew so well. Knew with your pity, the pity of Father for Bennet. There was fifty-six thousand dollars' worth of Father's pity drawing interest in Bennet's name. From the very first week of Fleta's return, you were sent out on the various shopping missions in the name of Father's pity for Bennet. Radio machine. Electric train. Punching bag. Sixty-dollar toy motor-boat.

Twice a week, Kate's niece, Katy, came to do the laundry work and brought her five-year-old Paddy. With the fine democracy of children, Paddy and Bobbie and Bennet slid the banisters and skated the halls, mostly, it is true, to the thumpings of Father's cane. Paddy had heather-colored eyes and a dear tilted nose, and she and Bobbie were forever in a whirlwind of somersaults and inglorious floor tussles, Bennet always wanting to break in, but being continually kicked from the fray by Paddy's fast sturdy little legs which kept churning him out of the game.

Over and over again, Father struck with his cane to prod Bennet into the closed circle. Bennet lunging and being churned back by Paddy's sturdy kickings.

Sometimes, Father literally, actually, beating Bennet with his cane into the game and Paddy, wild with the tussle, unlocking her grip of Bobbie long enough to strike out with her wild little frog-legs of arms.

"Go 'way — you sheeny — you — ugly — monkey on a string."

"Sheeny — you ugly!" Paddy didn't know what sheeny

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meant. It was only a word that spat out a connotation of ugliness.

Whack went Father's cane then, straight against Bennet's calves. And Bennet sprang infuriated, whether with the pain across his legs or the buckshot of the ugly words off Paddy's lips. But, at any rate, he sprang, grabbing Paddy by her fat little cheeks and kissing her hard and smeary all over her face and banging her on each side of the head, and then threw her and ran up and kicked her with his knee, so that she sat down like a big doll whose joints hinged.

Clump, clump, clump went Father's cane. Clump. Clump. Clump. Everybody thought it was for Bennet's naughtiness. Except Bennet and Father. They were regarding each other through the strange applause, hung-on face to hung-on face.

You remembered that day in the car — whizz — the car from Long Island with the blonde woman and the children in pink plush hoods. The woman who looked not unlike a doll with hinged joints, that had been sat there — by Father, probably, infuriated to conquest over her, by some buckshot of words like sheeny and monkey on a string.

Rather dreadful old Father, sitting there in his senility egging Bennet on. You should have felt sick with repugnance instead of sick with pity — pity for Father and for Bennet who was in his image.

To you there was something blessed in the rowdyism of the boys sliding up and down the long hallways to Father's thumping cane.

It made the house no longer that dreaded stilly place to leave, with Mother sliding through it always too close to the walls and Father down there dwindling into his silence.

Only Frank and Stella coming home, or Fleta coming with

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the children, could have endowed you with the strength for setting the day. It had been decided. On the fourth of April you were to begin novitiate.

And now suddenly Fleta, in her dear blowy distraught fashion, all over the house at the doing of the inconsequential things that were so consequential to her, and Mother getting hurled into by Bobbie in the dark hallways and doubling up on the stairway in pain — even that — being hurled into so that Mother sat gasping in the dark and squeezing her whitish eyes tight with the pain while Fleta pursued and cuffed, was preferable to the mute little scuttle of Mother's form along so close to the walls.

It was a busy house, now. Nicked into. Kicked into. "Naughty Bobbie, bucking into Grandmother that way!" "Next time, I'll spank you."

It made the being definite about the date of entering your novitiate so incredibly easier. It was easier to leave Mother being kicked by Bobbie, than to leave her sitting down in the cistern of the daylong silences — knitting with dry clicks just outside of Father's office.

Every other day, now that the time was set, you spent an afternoon at House of Mercy. There was a nun named Sister Gisila with whom you were permitted to have long talks and to follow her about and observe her at duties and ask of her questions.

Sister Gisila taught in the day school. Forty children, black and white, were her charges. She had a face exactly the shape of a heart. You had never seen such a look of maternity on any face as when Sister Gisila sat back with pride while the forty of her charges sang "Jesus, Savior of My Soul."

She was not very full of talk of God. In fact she seldom mentioned Him. Some of her forty charges were forever having head-colds and rashes that looked like scarletina, and as

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Sister herself put it, she used to drop as exhaustedly into her period of meditation as into a warm bath.

You could not help wishing that Sister Gisila would dwell less upon Sister Genevieve's crooked hemstitching and the children's bowels and the need for new blackboards and the raggedness of youngsters' stockings.

And yet, while Sister Gisila sat up on her platform and her forty sang with the shrill fervor of childhood, there was the glory of vicarious maternity forty times in her face.

She used to kiss the little white faces and the little black faces and her running talk to you was almost exclusively of routine.

And of gossip! The gossip of the convent! You remembered in convent one of the girls, a perpetual wag, Theresa Cloonan, had rigged up the bust of Socrates in the schoolroom, in a pair of spectacles and a sports hat.

Well, somehow in the gossip of House of Mercy there was something akin to that audacious incongruity. Sister Gisila, who walked in the glory of God, was just a little jealous of Sister Genevieve's place in the affections of Mother Dominici.

You learned from Sister Gisila that Sister Geraldine had tattled to Monsignor about the mice!

House of Mercy was mice-infested and bitterly ashamed of it, but for Sister Geraldine to have tattled it to Monsignor! Oh, yes, and Sister Thea was vainglorious of her eyelet embroidery, at every bazaar pushing it to front place, and there was no trusting Sister Clarisa alone with the primary classes, because she won the affections of the children away by her lack of discipline, and Mother Dominici could be dreadfully annoyed over scorched gruel for the children, unless it happened to be Sister Genevieve who did the scorching.

One afternoon when you arrived, Sister Gisila's mouth had been torn clear around to the center of her cheek, giving her the dreadful look of perpetual grin.

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One of the Negro prostitutes in the infirmary had become enraged at being segregated from her child and with the premeditation of days, had forced her way into the schoolroom, tearing Sister Gisila's lips by plunging her great black thumb into her mouth.

Sister Gisila, gashed mouth and all, and Sister Genevieve had volunteered for night duty and between them tended the half crazed creature.

It dawned upon you the day you first saw Sister Gisila kiss the black-faced child of the prostitute with the lips that had been torn that here was the life in imitation of Christ, going on under your very eyes — through all the little confetti of the gossip — through all the smell of iodoform — through all the tattling to Monsignor of mice.

Nuns among the Lilies. The white lilies and the black.

One day, walking home through the twilight, you met Ashfurth Ropps.

You remembered Ashfurth. He and Frank had struck up a friendship when they were both freshmen at Fordham and you were constantly being sent across the street to the Ropps front door to summon Frank home for dinner. That saucy time he had leaned out to smack you a kiss, like a jack from his box!

Mrs. Ropps you recalled as a large florid woman of conspicuous comings and goings in the luxurious motors of her friends and pupils, whose cars were lined up before her door, hours at a time.

She was one of the best-known vocal teachers in the city. It was not unusual to see a fur-smothered prima donna, whom you recognized from her photographs, coming down the tall brown stoop.

Floods of aria and chromatic scale sometimes poured down the narrow street and every so often a caterer's wagon of ice-

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cream buckets and camp-chairs and coat-racks arrived, and the Ropps house blazed with the ado of a reception, and the children from Columbus Avenue gathered along the sidewalk to see the motor loads drive up.

Ashfurth had a great unfurnished room he could call his own, clear across the top of the house. During the brief year or two that the Ropps lived there, he and Frank used to spend hours up there building miniature stages and puttering around with puppets on sticks.

Ashfurth at fourteen you remembered as a pale, rather pimply blond, in the first horn-rimmed spectacles you had ever seen. He had the first of almost everything. And Frank would recite bitterly at table: Ashfurth's new magic-lantern machine. Ashfurth's new canoe. Ashfurth's new bicycle. Frank who never had anything.

That was about all you seemed to remember clearly about Ashfurth, except the one time you had brushed by him in the hallway . . . and there was nothing to remember about that — except — except — and of course there was the time he had carried your books up the steps — and — the little goose-fleshings. It was horrid to remember them.

You seemed to remember, too, that when the Ropps moved away, they had gone to Europe. You recognized Ashfurth now, chiefly by the somewhat cave-like bulge of his forehead over the horn-rimmed glasses. His face had cleared into a scholastic-looking pallor that was quite the tan color of his hair and little set-on looking inch of mustache. At first you had thought he was someone ogling at you. You had never, since you could remember, been free from the oglings of men you passed in the streets. You had learned to walk right through the ogles, as if they had been so many leaves to kick through. Ashfurth had seemed to ogle, until he stepped up with his hat off, and you recognized the bulge of brow and the spectacles.

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"Hullo! Laura Regan, aren't you?"

"Yes — and you're Ashfurth Ropps."

"That's easy. You recognize me from my photographs. But me recognizing you is a different matter! It is rather a performance to find your mind working when it is stunned. I said to myself: 'Good God, this is the Blessed Damozel — must have chucked her golden bar from heaven, and here she is walking down here toward the Eighty-sixth Street entrance of Central Park.' Then I said: 'No, that's not the Blessed Damozel. That's Frank Regan's sister, used to live across the street from me. I don't seem ever to have paid much attention to her when she was a youngster, except that there was a kind of Bay of Naples blue about her I've never seen before or since. Eyes, I think.' Hello, Laura Regan."

You felt exactly as if the entire flesh covering of your body had crawled up a delicious half inch. A compliment always did that to you. The flash of a chill. A tingling so that you put your hand up to your cheek as if to still a bell from ringing.

It was not the compliment coming from Ashfurth that ran so excitingly against the very grain of you. It was the tribute to the urn-shaped loveliness that you could feel with your contour.

Ashfurth's face as it hung there in the twilight, as frailly molded as a woman's, was just another of the lanterns bobbing. The lanterns in the bog. There was a little beat at his temples.

"It is at least eight years, Ashfurth, since I have laid eyes on you."

"You're unbelievable, Laura."

He meant, of course, unbelievably beautiful! The little purr that made your flesh seem to crawl upward — shudders of it. You could not help it. . . .

"It's the same old me, Ashfurth, that used to run across the

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street to jangle your doorbell and drag Frank out of your lair and home to dinner."

"You were a little convent youngster then with yellow hair and a maddening little manner of being above suspicion. Something tells me that you've outgrown just the one of those two qualities that I would have you outgrow."

That was the kind of remark that always struck you dumb with a sense of your inability to meet its sophistry.

Galli-Brun used to make them like that before you stopped posing for him.

You were not made to be clever or complex or say things with double-edged meanings.

"God deliver me from the woman above suspicion. She's sure to have buckteeth or a conscience."

You giggled at that. Katy, the laundress, had buckteeth, and if she so much as scorched a handkerchief, crossed herself, and kept telling her beads, which she kept lying beside the beeswax.

Ashfurth was always smiling. Not with his lips. They had a pulled, fretted look. But with his voice. Everything he said was full of smile. It was one of the faces of doubt in the bog. Just to look at him made you feel placid.

You, who were the born handmaid. Of HIM. Whose name used in vain was constantly on Ashfurth's lips. You were so placid with faith.

"If your God is so omnipotent," Frank used to taunt you, "why does he cause HIMSELF pain by creating pain and ugliness in HIS world? Why does he make moles blind and give wolves more young than they can feed, and cause human flesh that is supposed to mirror HIM, to shrivel up into stinking decay? What's your God to say to that botch?"

"Ah, but it is because HE is omnipotent. In HIS wisdom, HE knows why we must suffer. HIS wisdom transcends ours." That was what kept you so placid with faith. That was why

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HE had marked you for HIS handmaiden. The gift of the psychology of the *religieuse* was yours!

You knew the look that made the face of Ashfurth seem to throb. The look of the faces in the bog. Even Ashfurth in these few words of being facetious and being complimentary, there in the park walking brusquely at your side, and leaning to peer into your face, made you shrink into your placidity.

"Frank is married, you know."

"And you? But don't answer. The suspense is easier to bear than the tiny word from you that may bring the world down crashing."

You knew the voice. It was the voice of all the young men you had ever known, when directed to you. It was the sex voice. The curving voice of man-to-woman and woman-to-man. And here you were, puckering up the delicious half inch to it. You, at whom Ashfurth Ropps had never so much as glanced in the days when he and Frank had lain prone on their stomachs for hours in the big room over across the top of his house, dreaming their mysterious adolescent dreams and stalking their puppets about miniature stages.

"No, I'm not married," you said, feeling heavy with having no retort to match the key of his.

"Well," he said, "at least that is simpler, if not so interesting."

You felt as if you had stooped to pick up a purse in the road and a scamp of a boy, hidden in the hedge, had jerked it away on a string. You were always running up against that with the people who tried to make you spar words with them.

You hurried along, swallowing down an absurd sense of rebuff from Ashfurth Ropps.

"Of course you've been reading about my mess."

Of course you had not. "What mess?"

It was Ashfurth now who seemed rebuffed. And more, a little aggrieved.

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"You haven't read? Or heard? Or seen my handsome phiz in the papers?"

"Heard what?"

"Are you trying to spare my tender sensibilities or is it possible that you haven't heard what the newspapers have been full of for weeks?"

You had not. It would not do, however, to try to explain to Ashfurth that the busy days of yours had so little to do with the affairs that gave that look of the throbbing of a felon to men's faces.

"Perhaps you haven't just tied it up with me. I'm the Ashfurth Ropps of the Derieux-Ropps divorce case. I married Evelyn Derieux five years ago in Paris."

You did remember vaguely. Frank had looked over the rim of a newspaper one evening, to surmise if it could be Ashfurth Ropps of old Fordham days who had married the daughter of Felix Derieux, millionaire art dealer of Paris and New York.

Yes, there was something about the combination of names, Derieux-Ropps, that had worn down a little into your consciousness, like the name of a much advertised soap or motor car. Derieux-Ropps.

"I married a hellion, Laurie. I suppose that is a caddish thing to admit, although I never could see why a man becomes a cad for daring to say something about a woman that he could say with impunity about a man. I suppose I should have let her family annul it in the beginning, because I never had a chance. What chance has a man with only a soul in his body against a crowd with millions in their pockets? Bah, but with Evelyn there was no chance of success anyhow. I don't pretend to have been a saint, but she would have despised a man who wasn't true to her, and destroyed one who was."

How bitter Ashfurth was. There was a little nervous flicker to the corner of his mouth.

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"I write plays, Laurie. Not for a living, God forbid, but naughty neurotic ones that nobody except little theater groups in subcellars will produce, and actors with adenoids will play in. I've an eye for situation! Here's one! Melancholy young Dane, the very week that a Paris divorce has released him from three years of purgatory, stumbles across a blessed damozel walking in beauty, or whatever it is blessed damozels walk in, in Central Park. 'Laurie,' cried Ashfurth, and grazed with his fingers the hand that dangled at your side, 'Laurie — you're beautiful! You're all the tranquillity there is in the world. You — you're as if somebody had placed a hand over a terrific headache and suddenly stopped it.'"

What a way to have put it. You couldn't ever have thought of it in words. To put out your hands on the throbbing of the faces and the throbbing of the hearts and the throbbing of the felons and bring to them some of the cool and some of the quiet — to have put out your hands on the troubled throb of Ashfurth . . . you drew back the thought, because suddenly, for some reason, it made you ashamed.

"Laura ——"

"I must turn, here."

"It's getting dark. Let me take you."

"No."

"Laura."

"No. No."

You began a little unaccountably to run through the dusk. You began to run — away ——

"Laura," called Ashfurth just before he must have lost you as you turned off the road into a strip of cinders that led to a bridle path, "Laura."

Your name as he called it, as you bounded out of his sight. It kept beating about so in you.

"Laura. Laura. Laura." You put your hands up to your face as you stumbled and ran through the bog of the dusk.

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How it beat! And your name kept knocking about in you that way of a bird that had got itself caught in a turret. And the breath in your throat was so warm — the warmth and the taste of blood.

Beloved ——

You had the ridiculous sense of being pursued. You weren't of course, and knew it, but you could not stop running. Running from the beating about inside of you of your name as it had been called by Ashfurth. Running from the little streak along the side of your hands where it had been touched and that burned as if a lighted cigarette end had grazed it.

Beloved. . . .

The house was dark when you reached it and the door to your room made a great bang when you opened it too quickly and widely. "Beloved," you cried, and went down on your knees before the Max.

Beloved — where are you ——?

You couldn't pray. You couldn't pray.

You wondered if you could have fainted, because when the electric bell for dinner, which Kate could ring by pressing one down in the kitchen, sounded in your room, you weren't on your knees any more, but lying out straight, still in your hat, with a little red welt on your forehead, where you seemed to have fallen against a chair edge.

It wasn't any use. Your mind kept skidding. For all the world like a tire, grinding around for clutch.

"Beloved — let me in — Beloved — where are you?"

Something had slammed. You seemed somehow outside of yourself. You were in an ague that blew hot and cold. You wanted Mother Agatha, and on the very impulse, shuddering, you did not want her. You wanted to tear open your being in confession and your feet which had the feeling of

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running distractedly about on a treadmill, would not carry you to Father Hearn. Your mind kept whirring around — Mother Dominici! There was something she had seemed to know. Something that in all her talks with you she had tried to tell you. The steep precipitous road to HIM that might hurl you down again and again. But you could no more have endured the slow low voice of Mother Dominici against the wound of your being. The wound of you.

Beloved, where are you? — the eyes that were open upon you, but the lids a little low, as if you could almost see again the quiver of the veins. You wanted to kiss them and dared not. You kept shuddering down into your hands, there on your knees before your shrine, and finally because you were so hot and so cold and so full of the torment that kept your mind skidding for clutch, you began the chores about your room.

Making your bed, and then for fear the next thing might not present itself quickly enough, unmaking it.

Fleta came in from taking Bobbie to riding school and found you at the frenzied job. She could not know that no sooner had you the coverlets spread smooth than you lashed and beat and frothed them back to confusion. And so dear Fleta took a hand, smoothing your pillows almost as if she were smoothing along the sleek grain of your hair, as she liked to do. Sweet and low. Everybody now, since the date for your novitiate had been set, was that way with you. Even Kate, who with the prerogative of her eighteen years in the household, used to scold at you. Mother, whose eyes were always red with having cried over you in secret. The little death of you! As if you were not the one who was going out of the bog into reality.

Only they must leave you be. They kept making something remote and terrible of it. The children were taught to go softly past your door. Fleta wept over you, even when her

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eyes were dry. And there she was patting at your pillows with the gesture of the little death. You who were going into reality. And they who were in the bog. Only they would not leave you be — they — Mother — with the red rims about her eyes — Father dwindling into his silence — Frank and Stella with their shellacked-looking eyes — Fleta smoothing your pillow. Ashfurth.

"Fleta," you shouted at the smoothing of the hands — "don't — do you hear me? Don't. Don't. Don't"; and threw yourself huddled at the foot of the bed with the sheet against your mouth to keep down the sounds of your terror. Terror at being shut out. Terror of the eyelids with the beat of the veins in them, that were down ever so slightly at you. Terror of that streak along your hand as if a cigarette end had grazed it.

"Laurie — darling — what?"

If only your lips would cease their horrid shuddering. It was as if you had made a gyrating leap into the air — out of yourself, and there before Fleta too, who would soothe you and torment you and madden you.

There was nothing to say. There was nothing to say. "Fleta, don't. Don't, please. I'm all right. Don't touch me. I'll be all right. It's just — it's just ——"

Just what? Where were you? What door had slammed? All the prayers — the prayers that used to rise like incense — where were they? Your lips. Your mute and shuddering lips. The EYES looking at you but with the lids so low that you could see the veins. What was there that could be said to Fleta? To anyone? You, who never talked about God to anyone — HIM — Beloved — suddenly shut out from HIM. . . .

The crashing about. The rising flood of your terror. The bobbing about of everything like furniture that had been flood-washed out of houses, twisting downstream on high

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and stormy waters. What had happened to you? The flood. The nuns lugging the mattresses down the halls that smelled so of iodoform. You hated the lugging of mattresses down halls that smelled of iodoform. The little flap to the red rep curtains of Father Hearn's confessional box that had been something living and receptive. Now suddenly it was a closed door. The door of the Eyelids with the quivering veins. . . .

"Beloved — am I too frail? — Where are you?"

"Laurie, what has upset you? Laurie — now that your time is so near — tell me. Are you frightened? Talk to me. Don't shut me out this way. Laurie, are you sure of yourself? Sister, are you sure?"

You wrenched back from having your face squeezed that way between Fleta's thumb and forefinger so she could grill with her eyes into yours — you wrenched back tormented. You were like a wild thing with torment. The torment that Fleta could know nothing about or even Mother Agatha or Mother Dominici, or Father Hearn.

"Laurie, it isn't too late! Hundreds of girls have found out in time. That's what the year of probation is for. The Church doesn't want you, dear, unless you are sure. There was a girl in my class at convent, Laurie, Christine Lynch, the very week before she was to enter Sacred Heart, she had the courage to admit her mistake. Laurie, dear, are you sure of yourself? Are you certain that you haven't let this affair with Dudley blind you for the moment?"

Fleta's talk! It was easier just to let it beat and beat itself out.

"Are you fitted by temperament to be a nun, Laurie? Sometimes I think you are. Sometimes I *know* you are, and then again I — you bewilder me so, Laurie. You are of the spirit, Laurie, more than anyone I seem ever to have known. And again you are so of the flesh. God has given you so much

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beauty, darling. To make it hard for you, I guess. Renunciation. Dearest, can't you talk to me? Old Fleta. Sister, are you afraid?"

Sister, are you afraid? When Fleta whispered it to you that way, it went right through you and through you, as if she had said it in a nave that had the trick of echoes.

Sister-are-you-afraid-sister-are-you-afraid-sister-are-you-afraid?

No. No. No. You could not talk it. Not even with Fleta. Not even with HIM! The hours before HIM, on your knees there — the pansies with the little patient faces peering over the rim of the dish — Fleta's face — dear, dear Fleta — poor, poor Fleta —

"Go away. I'm all right. I'm tired. I want to be alone."

Poor bewildered Fleta, standing frozen in the attitude of having been pushed away, while you dashed through the hall, into your hat and wrap and out into a raw bluster of March that blew your cape up over your head like a great angry flame and flurried your skirts, and made your face, where it burned of the strange fever, seem to spin.

Ash-cans caught in the gale that shooed the city before it, rolled along the pavements with enormous clatter, and dust blew in funnels, and heads were out of windows with an eye to cyclonic clouds.

You started, in your hurry, across the park toward Mother Dominici, but presently, instead, you were walking around the reservoir.

Gray of clouds — blast of gale — splash of water against square stone shores — it was good to bend into the square gray day — you wanted to bend on and on — except —

You knew now! You were waiting! You were waiting for someone. You must go home. Someone for whom you were waiting might come! No — no — your mind kept skidding — skidding off prayer — skidding away from the prospect of

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confession — skidding. Where was there to go that would make it endurable for you not to go home?

Because you were waiting. Under the tumult you were waiting.

You must hurry home to tell Kate. To tell Kate that you were not at home to the someone for whom you were waiting.

The street was still in a little gale and the ash-cans rolled before you.

Kate opened the door for you. She had been in suds. Her arms were soaked and moist-looking, and ordinarily she would have berated you for having forgotten your key. But Kate, like all the rest now, had that air with you. Sweet and low.

"Darlin'," she said, "you should have worn your big coat, it's that blust'ry. From the feel of me feet, we're in for some snow — may Mother of God deliver us from them March kind of blizzards ——"

"Kate ——"

"Yes, darlin' ——"

"Has anyone — been here?"

You had not meant to ask that!

"Nobody, darlin', but Doheny, a-pestering your fayther ——"

"Kate ——"

"Yes, darlin' ——"

You wanted to say it. You stood rooted with wanting to say it. Kate, you wanted to say, with the tongue that was rigid in your mouth, no matter who calls, I am not at home.

"Kate ——"

"Yes, darlin' — what is it ——"

"Nothing. Never mind."

At four o'clock he came.

He was in the parlor, standing before a portrait of you at

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four, taken in what appeared to be a daisy-field, except that the photographer's back-drop showed a sweep of drapery across the meadow.

"You shouldn't have come," you said, advancing no farther than the door.

"Then neither should there be starshine, nor springtime nor tides, nor wretched gales that blow down Eighty-second Street and snatch your breath out of your mouth," said Ashfurth, and came forward with the light reflected against his spectacles until they were two blazes.

"Well?"

You sat on the edge of your chair and there were the bites of eight finger nails into your palms and something strange was happening to your breathing, because it was exactly as if all the gale outside were in your head and you tried holding your breath to make certain. And sure enough, it was you breathing that way. In a gale.

What if Ashfurth were hearing it! You cut deeper with your nails into your palms and tried to pray a little for quiet.

"Why did you run away from me yesterday?"

The matter-of-factness helped. Ashfurth out there beyond the gale, rolling a cigarette and licking it along the edge with his tongue and gazing at you with two smiles behind the blaze of his spectacles.

"You shouldn't have come."

"Of course I shouldn't. No man except a hopeless addict to your sex is going to find himself out of the frying pan one day and into the divine fire again the next. What right did you have anyway to chuck your golden bar of heaven and walk in on my brand-new emancipation, the way you did last night? Of course I shouldn't have come. Even now, if I had a shred of the instinct of self-preservation, I'd run, not walk, toward the nearest exit."

To be looked at like that, even while he said the easy

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careless things. The loved women, the legendary women of storied romance must all have been looked at by men like that. You wanted not to feel the shimmer — the shimmer of being looked at by Ashfurth Ropps like that.

"You're a Lorelei, and you sit on a rock, and you comb your twenty-four-carat-gold hair with a twenty-four-carat-gold comb, and I, a sailor just off one reef, ought to know better when I see another ahead. Damn you and your golden comb, is what I should be saying. Go bob your golden hair, or sell it to save your virtue. There's a bad sailor-boy in port."

You knew now. The shimmer was a shudder. And the shudder was revolt. There was something repellent about Ashfurth. His tan pallor that you could feel against your very own flesh. When he crossed his legs, he crossed them twice, winding the one around the other in a boneless fashion his extreme thinness permitted. And his fingers literally dripped to their ends in illuminated finger nails that hung like drops.

The shimmer was a shudder, you kept telling yourself in a kind of triumph. A shudder for the long lean face of Ashfurth's that you remembered when it had been sprinkled with pimples. And the little black pools set into the tan pallor of his cheeks were repellent and the way he sat hunched there with his legs knotting around each other and the gleam in his eyeglasses that made him seem to laugh twice. And all this clatter of his smart talk. The kind of talk that ordinarily made the back of your neck ache. His making you seem to be on the defensive. Your tongue felt a little like Mary Walsh's curling out at him.

"You mustn't come here any more."

"Why?"

"I'm taking my vows next month. You didn't know that, did you?"

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"Your what?"

"I am entering my novitiate at House of Mercy. I am going to be a nun." Dear little security of that word. You liked to hear yourself say it. Nun. A word the Gothic shape of a little chapel.

The fretted-looking upper lip of his and the tiny light mustache that he was always worrying with his nervous fingers began to quiver then and suddenly all the fragile splintery glass in the world was breaking. That was the sound of Ashfurth's laughter, shattering over everything.

"Oh. Oh. Oh. ' . . . As chaste as ice, as pure as snow . . . get thee to a nunnery, go.' This is priceless. Who was the naughty little nun back somewhere in Doge's days, who wore her robes as Monna Vanna wore hers, so that when they dropped, men might die of her gleaming whiteness? You can count on me at the dropping of the cloak to die ecstatically of the first stroke of white lightning."

You felt precisely as you sometimes did in a dream which was common to you, of being thrust, half dressed, and by someone horrid, into the center of a crowded room. You started to run from the sound of the splintering glass. . . .

"Laura," he cried, and darted out an arm as you dashed past his chair toward the door.

"Laura, you precious little idiot, stop it! No more bounding-hare nonsense. I've a heart murmur. I detest pursuing people. Bless you, I deserved the delicious nunnery-nonsense of your rebuke. Now sit down here and tell me why you crossed my path and my equilibrium last night of all nights, O laughing gods, and then I'll treat you as much like a nun as any woman ever wants to be treated."

You wanted to wrench your hands free, but there they were again — with the feeling of being frozen to ice that would rasp the flesh if you tore it away.

"You — you fool! Must you interpret everything in that

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twisted double-edged, horrid way of yours! You mustn't come here. I'm ready for my novitiate, next month."

"Look at me much longer out of those purple pin wheels of eyes of yours and I'll run to cover, I mean to cowl, myself."

"Can't you stop being clever long enough to take in that what I say is true?"

"Gorgeous little golden pheasant, you. If there was ever a sparkle of truth in your damn sex, it ought to be in those purple-pin-wheel eyes of yours. If you are as spiritual as you look, I'll hang back on to your sex the last shred of faith that Evelyn tore off for me. Laura, you naughty little Doge-nun, you. I want to be struck by the white lightning of you!"

"You go!"

"Little idiot, you're not so dumb as you are entitled to be, with that face of yours, are you? You aren't seriously going in for the supreme and unmatched imbecility known as taking the veil."

Your hand that was glued there to the ice of his. The ice that felt fever-hot.

"If you don't go," you said, closing your eyes and letting yourself tremble because you could not bite down into your lips any more, "if you don't go, I'll do something silly, like faint or ——"

"Damn little, gorgeous little fool you, faint so I can look my fill at you. Sit down here and let me talk to you, or I'll breathe on you like a dragon and scorch you up to a beautiful cinder."

"There is nothing to be said."

"Where is your sense of humor? Where is your respect for this God of yours? Why did He breathe a pearl into flesh and call it you, if it wasn't to further a pet scheme of His known as the human race?"

To breathe a pearl into flesh. . . .

"If I had a God, and God knows I haven't, I'd give Him credit for that much perspicacity. I'd respect His intent and

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purpose. You are His gift to the race. He gave biology a push when He made you. You maddening little nun, you. You nun with a body made out of white lightning. You naughty little sister who crosses men's paths when they want to be free of you and your tribe. Uh — uh — don't you scratch, or I'll spank! You are as warm as life and as warm as love and some damn fool has doused you."

"And you are hateful. . . ."

"According to every tried and true fiction precept, and by my troth, upon that statement hangs the beginning of love. . . . Listen . . . look at me . . . drink my poison . . . it is a rare sweet poison, too dangerous for the masses who must know nothing about it and who must go their dunderhead ways. It's the philosophy of love and of life, Laura. The hedonist's philosophy that birth and death are the beginning and the end — to be neither questioned nor troubled about. It's the interval that counts. The now! Cram it as you would a vial, with precious naughty attar. Cram it with the kind of love that you can give me and I can give you. That God of yours upstairs there on His pearl and platinum throne, made His rocks and His deserts sterile. And just as surely He made you for love. Don't cheat Him, Laura. Don't throw yourself into the hypnosis of the undersexed women; the sterile women; the disappointed women and the fanatical women, of servant-girl mentality, who love to scrub for the Lord and an ascetic night's lodging. Any woman can be a sublimated servant girl. If you must have a God, go as far as you like, but don't go and bore Him by spending your life kissing His feet."

You were too affronted to talk. You sat and quivered. The Pieta there at the table. You wanted to spread your skirts, to shield the dear drained body that must be quivering as you were quivering — but your burning hand there, magnetized to the burning cold of Ashfurth's and the double shine of his eyes laughing at you — laughing at you — twice —

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"You are rude and you are vulgar and so far outside — Ashfurth — so far outside the — truths that I know — that I can't seem to be angry — only sorry — so terribly sorry — for you, Ashfurth — and for Frank and for — everybody — outside — whistling in the dark — that is what you are doing, Ashfurth — all of you — whistling in the dark — and I am sorry — so terribly sorry ——"

"Laura, you sorry for me! Why aren't I fifty times fifty times the pitiable object I am? Tell me what to do to become utterly the object of your pity. What can I do to deserve it more and more? Laura, dearest little fool, you, — stop being afraid of me! ——"

"Afraid of you!"

"Can't you see what I am? I'm one of your miracles. I've come along in the nick of time to save you from your own adorable idiocy. You've mussed my plans as much as I intend to muss yours. A free man, Laurie, for the first time in five years — walking through Central Park hugging a brand-new decree and drenching myself in the luxury of it — and bang, you come crashing into my emancipation from your devilish sex! If I'm upsetting you, what do you think is happening to me? Only let's not be serious about it, Laura. Let's not be serious about anything. I want to be a pagan in hoofs and things. I want to nibble grass and blow five little pipes. You get out of my way, you little damozel you, unless you want to come nibble with me . . . sweet, naughty, poison grass ——"

You kept feeling horrid and undressed, listening to the rushing vehement things. The rushing vehemence of Ashfurth, a vehemence that was full of laughter. At you. That brittle sound of the splintering of glass.

Poor Ashfurth. He was like a faun outside a temple. Grinning in. The temple of the quiet things you knew.

"Poor Ashfurth."

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"Laura, say it again. That way! What must I do to deserve your pity every minute? Say it again, that way. I feel like a fellow before a trickle of some precious kind of spring water — or maybe its just your eyes when you look that way, that I am thirsty for — their holy water."

The shine of the Pieta between you. But standing there, resisting him a little with your weight, so that your arm was pulled out tense by the hand he held, you could not help it. Your ear was cocked for what Ashfurth was saying. To be looked at that way —

"Ashfurth — will you go!"

"If you mean it, yes."

The two round disks of Ashfurth's eyes, blazing through spectacles, in the narrowness of face. The cocksure challenging eyes.

"If you mean it, yes!"

You did mean it. You did. Beloved — I do mean it. Help me to mean it — make me — mean it —

"I mean it. I want you to go."

"If I thought you did —"

"I do."

"Very well, then, naughty nun. I'll go. I don't want to frighten you. I want to talk to you. Gently. You save me from myself, Laura, the demon of myself, and I'll save you from the foolish little saint of yourself. Play with me in the merry interval between the beginning and the end. The merry interval called *now*. I'm trying to keep out of hell. As for heaven, it lies in your eyes. Bad child. Think, Laurie, while I'm gone. Think hard."

No. No. Not think. You wanted to pray. It was like wanting to cry and having no tears. You wanted to pray and the burning wouldn't let you. It kept you the whole of that tormented day running up-and-downstairs. Emptying trunks.

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Foraging in attic rooms for nothing in particular. There was a cassock you were hemming for Father Hearn. The needle kept slipping and stabbing you. The children. You romped with them. You let them get wild and dig their little claws into your flesh for the relief of it. You read the stock reports to Father, holding your knees so tight that you could feel them sing of the pressure of one against the other. The stairs. The three long flights of them. Somehow they helped. They kept you running up and down. There could never seem to be enough of them to run off the torment.

You helped Kate, who kept protesting, to tack lace-paper on fourteen pantry shelves. You lugged a great washbowl and pitcher that still disfigured a bedroom, from the days before running water had been installed on that floor, up to the attic. You banished Mother, who was complaining of sciatica, up to her room for a nap, and with one of Bennet's tools, sawed off a too-long fourth leg of her sewing chair that made it wobble. You carried a bowl of jonquils from your room down into Mother's, while she lay sleeping, and put them on a stand beside her.

You had reason, later, to be heartachingly glad that you had done that.



Mother was dead.

She had died in the very sleep beside which you had placed the jonquils. You had thrown an extra light coverlet across her feet before you tiptoed out, because you had fancied that she shivered. And then, later, as you were running the stairs from the attic to the third floor, Fleta's great cry plunged like a rapier into silence.

Mother's hand had fallen along the bed edge. And to Fleta, passing, there was something strangely frightening about the dangling of that hand. "Mother!" cried Fleta, and ran

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toward it. It was Fleta's second cry that rang through the house, enormous with terror.

Mother, at whom nobody ever looked, was dead.

Mother. Mother. How like her to steal off, precisely as a little kitten you once had, to die in a corner. You had cried terribly, not because of the death of that kitten, but what hurt you as physically as pain, was the foolish fact of the upturned dead little paws. You had spanked those paws, every now and then, for tearing at upholstery. You remembered the cowering down and the flattening of the ears. The meekness against which you had raised your hand even in the tiny blows. There they lay, emblemed in those little dead paws. Your hurts.

In Mother's meekness as she lay there, were emblemed some of your hurts to her. You had always planned somehow, some way, to tell her one of these days, probably with your face against her lap, that every little impatient shrug at her, every flip of annoyance, not only your own, but everybody's — Frank's — Father's, Fleta's — were so many pockmarks of pain into your flesh. You had made up your mind that Mother should know, somehow, all of this before you went away. Your hurting for her. The pity. The tapers you would keep burning for her.

And now Mother, dead this way. Without absolution. Without rite. Like the kitten with your little blows emblemed in its paws, that had gone off to die out of the way. You wanted to kiss open her eyes — just for time enough to tell her — you wanted to warm open her lips — you wanted to thaw with your tears the locked look on her face. You wanted to pray and you had no prayers.

And now suddenly about Mother, at whom no one had ever looked, all the paraphernalia of death.

She was so remote and so stiff and so caparisoned with it.

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The comings and the goings. There seemed no way to be alone with her.

Already Father Hearn had been there and Bishop Blaney, and the shades lowered and candelabra burning, and a pillow of lilies appeared at the foot of the bed even before the embalmers arrived, and Mother, to whom you wanted to whisper — alone — was grand in the trappings of death.

Mother to whom you had something to say. Mother to whom you all had something to say. It was as if you stood about, each and every one of you, edging, waiting, to be alone with Mother for the something you had to say. Father who had stumped up on Victor's arm, standing there at the foot of the wide black bed, and looking, for the first time you could remember, directly at the frail little ridge of Mother. Looking at her with eyes that had gone out of his face. Just black smudges . . . Father standing and looking at Mother — without eyes —

Fleta, whose tears were ready enough, dear knows, daubing them on Mother's hand that dangled in that strange dead way and forcing Bennet, who held back and cried, to speak a litany, and to kiss the little ridge along the sheet that had been Mother.

How terrible for all of you to find Mother's face locked there against what you wanted to say.

But not Kate. Kate who for eighteen years had driven Mother and her futile putterings out of the kitchen precisely as she had you and Frank and Fleta and now Bobbie and Bennet.

Kate, who feared Father and bullied Mother, on her knees now beside the faint ridge, oblivious of Father standing there — waiting — with the eyes gone out of his face, and crying out whenever a twinge of remorse bit into her grief.

"Mother of God — Jesus — Savior — nearly twenty years of faithful service I've given her, but forgive me, Mother of

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God, for the rough ways I had with her. She that timid, and me with my blustering at her. Darlin', can you hear me asking your forgivin' now? I was always meaning to ask it of you in life, darlin' — and here is death before anybody could know it. It's some was never meant for nothing but trodding on. The like of me, darlin', daring to drive you out of your own kitchen as many a time I'd the nerve to! The time you was for wanting to make the orange marmalade for Mr. Frank, and I told you that if you came puttering into my kitchen, I'd be walking out of it for keeps. Mother of God, forgive. The very next day him running off from you that way, and me having stood in the way of your making marmalade for him the last day you had him. It's a blessing we've a saint child in the family — to pray for you, darlin', the way you deserve to be prayed for. Laurie will pray ——"

Poor Kate. You were afraid Father would come down on her with the thumping of his cane, but he only stood there at the foot of the bed, leaning on Victor, his face like a desert with two dry waterholes for eyes.

How much — how much Father must have to say to the little ridge of Mother. You kissed the clump of his hand out of your pity for his great share in the torment of remorse that was beating all about the bedside of Mother.

Only that morning Mother had asked him three times if she might have the use of the car for carrying a stack of her finished knitting down to the little slum parochial school that for years she had kept supplied with sweaters and mittens and chest protectors.

And Father would not answer.

You were used, in that house, to asking Father questions he would not answer. You had all had your share of that kind of Father's torture. Even you he would not always answer. And often as a child you had seen Frank, who was grown, asking four, asking five times, and then stand quiver-

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ing in the silence with the lightning all out about his nostrils. And Mother, that very morning, on her way out of life, so to speak, had paused to stand for the last time the torture of having Father refuse with his silence a question she had asked him three times.

The tears that must be running inside him. Father would weep that terrible way. You kept kissing the clump of his hand in this silence that belonged to Mother. And in which it was his turn now to stand in torment. Finally you dragged off Fleta and Frank and Kate and left him alone in it.

Steeped in it.

Father whose terrible tears must all have been running inward until his eyes were only holes.

The next time you saw Mother she was in her bier.

Under glass.

They had dressed her in white and the veiling across her hair concealed its scantiness and came down under her hands, as she would hold a scarf, and the sunk, locked look was gone from her propped-up jaw and up around her cheek bones was color.

The embalmers must have done that. Dressing Mother up that way, like a doll in a box! Her little hands, newly pink at the nails. . . .

All this ado about Mother, as if she were a bride . . . paraphernalia of death. When all that you wanted, with the pain twisting at your heart, was to tell Mother. To tell her — with her face gray and sunken the way you had known it in life, and not all prettified in its casket.

And now that you could not cry and now that you could not pray, and now that Mother had shut you out of her death, somewhere inside a wellspring had died. You struggled for tears and you struggled for prayers and you struggled for the words of remorse to Mother and something, a sirocco that had

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started with a touch along the side of your hand, and raged through you, had dried you of everything except the pain.

You were only dumb, and the prayers, clinkers in your throat.

Mother. Mother. Mother, you cried from your wilderness.

And: Beloved, take her to You carefully. She's so little and so meek and so hurt. Mother is so terribly meek, Beloved. That is what makes it hurt so. Take her unto you and make her unafraid. We haven't kept her all prettified, the way she is in her box here. She's gray, Beloved. She is as gray as all the bat wings in the world when they are folded down. Cause her to shine, Beloved. In Glory. Mother. Mother. What was it in me — the little devils — sometimes I too, didn't answer — I used to pretend not to hear — Mother, are you forgiving us? Are you seeing Father, dearest? Isn't he as sad as a ruin? You who see us all so plainly now, shivering here in our nakedness before you. Beloved, take her to You gently and make her grayness to shine with Your glory.

Frank, shriveled down there at the end of the bier, with his cap crunched up in his hand and wringing it, as if it were full of water.

You knew that look in his eyes. It was the look when the burs of Mother's were against his. There they were against his now, as surely as if Mother's eyes in the casket were open and looking. It was horrible to see Frank looking and trying to blink them away. Stella was there with her arm about him, but not even Stella knew what you knew about Frank fighting that cling of Mother's eyes. All of his life he had fought it. They had been such pitiable eyes to him. You wondered with your pity if all of his life he must not continue to fight it. The pitiableness of Mother's eyes clinging there against his remorse for the little things that never could be righted now.

How you all huddled.

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All the little women. In gray, poverty-colored sweaters. You had never known that Mother knew any of them and here they were with their tears. Little women out of the parishes to which Mother was always carrying her knitted things. You recognized some of their mittens by the very drop-stitches. The parishes that were far away and the parishes for which Mother had so often stood quivering in the silence of having asked Father three times for the car that she might carry them the knitted things.

All the three days that Mother lay like the doll in the box, the parlor was full of them. Sobbing out their prayers. Uttering their benedictions. Telling their beads. Bringing in driftwood stories of Mother in her mercies.

Mercies of which you had not known.

The three little fat priests and the two giant ones who came from the remote parishes to strew her with their blessings. The children in their caps of her knitting, who stared at Bennet and Bobbie in their white serge, and at the crystal chandelier swathed in netting that glistened over the coffin, and at Mother, when they were lifted, their heavy little lips apart at the wonder of her who had been so frailly kind to them, asleep there, with that pink light on the cheek bones that had once been so gray.

Somehow they knew Mother, these little people in the knitted poverty-colored things. They had seen her outside of being timid of her family. They had seen her slide babies into warm things and ask questions that were answered. Not one of them had ever kept her standing quivering in the vacuum of an unanswered question, or pretended because of the furtive way it came through her cracked-looking lips, not to have heard.

The square fat little Mrs. O'Hallahan, drenching the pearl rosary Mother had given her with her tears, and lifting her four children one after another, for each to kiss the plate-glass lid.

"Mc a-sittin' on the edge of me washtub a-looking over

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the yisterday's paper and all of a sudden her name — 'Nora Louise Bevins Regan, beloved wife of Patrick Henry Regan, devoted mother of Fleta Quinliven, Laura and Frank Regan, in her fifty-ninth year' — Mother of God, me with a day's washing in soak. A good woman if ever there lived one, was sent in her to walk among us. Many's the pair of little baby feet would have gone cold in the parish, except for her blessedness. May the Lord God Savior rest her in peace."

All the little women. The little women without remorse. And you who could not weep or pray, and Frank with the burs against his eyes, and Father standing there leaning on Victor in a silence that must have meant the internal hemorrhage of his tears.

As if Mother needed your remorse. . . .

The little women with the undiluted griefs. There were none of the nicks in them of having slighted Mother or turned from the dry scabby way of her lips, or steeped her in the silence that made her quiver, or excoriated her with Frank's kind of nervousness of her, or of Father—who had committed adultery.

You knew it now! He was as terrible-looking as an old crow, as he stood looking down at the trumped-up bride of Mother in the box. The bride whose cheek bones he had let turn the gray of all the folded bat wings in the world, and now their little laid-on circles of rouge seeming to mock him.

How terrible that it took death to teach you life. The sudden wisdom of you all. The family standing there. If only Mother were alive again, what you would do for her!

And now Mother was dead and the wisdom had come stalking after the event like an old bell, clanking at the tail end of a procession.

The house slid along through the days. It was as if, walking the hallways so close to the walls, Mother had one day merged into them. The years of her footsteps lay along the

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floors, until sometimes you felt as if you were walking on gray moths, that moved a little of life. Mother's life.

The children raced along the moths and slapped at the walls that were catacombs of Mother, and Victor thumped Father up and down the hallways when it was too wet to walk with him in the courtyard, and one day, about a week after the funeral, you and Fleta made mounds of Mother's clothing for the little women to come and carry away.

Every day, for a month, there was mass at St. Xavier's for Mother.

Thirty little extra funerals.

Father buying masses for Mother and sitting home dumb with his clumps of hands hanging into silence, waiting.

Waiting for you who would presently return from chapel and kiss the clumps of hands out of your pity for them and for Fleta who would run breathlessly for him, whenever he indicated with a bang of his cane, and for Bennet to come home from high mass for Grandmother and sit on the little stool at his feet in the curious hung-on-face-to-face silence these two could indulge in.

Sometimes at the masses, the numbness was almost more than you could bear. It became a paralysis. The old, locked feeling as if your knees were in the vise again. Something had got itself frozen in you. All of your prayers that you wanted to send after the repose of Mother were silent in you, like flowers embalmed in a block of ice. And your heart was the block of ice.

You wanted to pray. Like Fleta in her black, sobbing there beside you with her face in her hands. Like Kate, who never missed one of the masses for Mother and moaned every time the bell tinkled.

The little figures in the half light, kneeling there in the glacial kind of viscosity of chapel climate.

Mother. . . .

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You in the dark there. A matter of weeks before your novitiate and everything had gone drowning down into the numbness.

It was no use. The mass being said every day in the chapel at five for Mother, there on the outside of you, now. The Sacrament of the Flesh and the Blood that used to seem as if you could feel it run into your own blood stream.

There had never been a time when the beauty of the Eucharist and the act of Communion had not excited you, so that the bread became the Flame of HIS flesh, and the wine, ruby of HIS blood. Solemnity and grandeur of the act of the sacrament.

And now — the faces in the bog — the faces that were pointed with the doubting that Christ may be said to be offered as often as the sacrament is observed. Here you were, somehow, out among them. You, who were on the eve of novitiate to HIM. You, upon whom the Eyes had opened in invitation. You, who had even learned your marriage vows to God and could recite them. . . .

HE has placed His seal upon my forehead.

That I should admit no other Lover but Him.

I am espoused to Him, at whose beauty the sun and the moon stand up in wonder; the empire of the world and all the grandeur of this earth I have despised for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom I have seen, whom I have loved, in whom I believe, and toward whom my heart inclineth.

He has placed His seal upon my forehead.

That I must admit no other Lover but Him.

Mother — Mother — I have lost my way — Mother, help me to find HIM — Beloved, hear me — I am in the dark. . . .

*

You tried not to see it happening. Once in the car, Hilton had run down a dog that darted into the road and you had clapped your hands over your eyes, in time not to see it.

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But you had felt the thump of the wheels passing over his body.

That thump had left a little ridge in you that stayed.

It was so with Fleta. You tried not to see it, but the hurting ridge of knowing it, was there.

There was scarcely a slip in the cog of the household, so surely did Fleta slip into Mother's place.

The little gray household account books that Mother was always dabbing into with the stub of a lead pencil that she wetted constantly at her lips, Fleta was at them now, morning after morning, just that way, with the same worried pucker between her eyes before going down with the accounts to Father. Father who could keep Fleta standing before him in the prolonged silence of what would probably mean no answer at all, or at best, a rebuke. Kate's fashion of clattering down objects with a churlish kind of intensity every time Fleta ventured into the kitchen. Fleta's smile could look so heart-breakingly silly, a little spangle of sweat along her upper lip as she waited. . . .

You could see Fleta turning the gray of all the folded bat wings in the world. The house was sucking her into its scheme. She slid along the hall walls, not quite so close and not quite their color — yet.

Father, when he talked to her as she stood before him with the gray account books, never looked right at her, but with his eyes focused somewhere above her head. The dear blowzy head of Fleta, who always when she talked to Father, broke out in the little spangle of sweat along her upper lip.

The beginning of the Fleta at whom no one ever looked.

Frank and Father had stood shoulder to shoulder over the glass doll-box of Mother, and Stella had brought down the baby wrapped in innumerable things of Mother's knitting, to see Father the following week.

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They had come in the subway. Stella lugging the baby all done up into the stiffness of a little papoose. Frank in his cap and untidily soft collar, lugging with the utmost insensibility to the lowliness of the chore, a Boston-bag of bottles, bandages and a moo-cow that said Baa when you pressed it.

You knew in a way, if not specifically, the vastness of Father's wealth. If nothing else, and there was much else, there were the Regan grain elevators and the block of seventeen buildings along the river front of lower Manhattan and the Regan terminal in Astoria, to say nothing of the Yards that had yielded so munificently, even through the years of Father's incapacity.

Frank used to speculate upon the enormity of Father's taxes, and even Mother had sometimes peered into Father's deposit books that were left lying on his desk.

One month there had been ninety-seven thousand dollars in checks, between the leaves, waiting for the daily messenger from the Yards. That was the month Mother had wanted one hundred dollars for the new kindergarten furniture for one of her parishes, and Father had let her stand drenched in the silence of his refusal.

All of that week Mother's lips, scabbier than ever, from being drier than usual, had a little repetitious movement to them. Ninety-seven thousand — ninety-seven . . .

You had known, ever since you could remember, and even though you had never been told it, or allowed to discuss it, that Father was rich.

Frank used to egg you into getting money from Father to pay his boy-debts at Fordham.

Father had never left you standing in the silence of refusing you money . . . but there were countless scars of little memories.

Your tenth birthday party, for instance, to ten little girls from the convent. Poor Mother, she had not been clever

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enough to maneuver the ice cream. There was tapioca pudding instead, with plenty of rich milk in it and stuck with raisins, but one of the little girls had swallowed hard with not wanting it and begun to cry. There it was, the bland and viscous stuff, when not a father's daughter among all the ten but had ice cream on her birthday! . . . Even the little girls had known that Father was rich, and the next day from the primary to the junior classes, it was known that you had only tapioca pudding on your birthday!

You had not minded really. Except it made you so full of pity for Father — their knowing that he had given you the tapioca birthday.

Poor Father. His speech was so thick now it wasn't much use at all. Besides you, it was Fleta who could interpret him best, crouching breathless at his feet in that absolutely unquenchable sweet eagerness of hers to help.

But that seemed to annoy him, and so, during the visit of Stella and Frank, with the baby, you sat stiffly in the family conference and strangely enough it was Stella who could seem to understand Father's thick clumps of words even better than you and Fleta. Stella with her young eager face thrust out at his hung-on one.

Father, at least, was out and open about urging Frank back into the business and home. He asked it so sickeningly, with his poor words all glued together like a clump of bees buzzing. You were so sorry, so terribly sorry for Father, who must be bitter inside with having to ask. It occurred to you that you had actually never heard Father's voice rise to the inflection of a question before. Father had never asked questions. Father had ordered.

Here then was the argument all over again. Only Stella was so clipped and concise, and she had it all said and done before Frank, with the look still in his eyes of Mother's stuck to his, could waver into surrender.

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"Why should Frank go back into the business, Father Regan? He was only a figurehead, anyway. Besides, the Yards run themselves, and even if they don't, you've so much it doesn't matter."

Oh, Stella was a match for Father all right. There was something eye-to-eye about these two.

You put your hand over Father's. Stella was so right and yet there he sat, in the cruel paralysis of a storm that could not thunder.

"Frank's writing a book, Father Regan. I think it's going to be a good one, and we've five hundred dollars advance on a play he's sold. We're going to take that money and clap it into one of those back-of-the-magazine bungalows, out in Richmond Heights. Frank will finish his novel out there. Mother will keep house for us and I'm about to get a job as private secretary to the President of the Richmond Hill National Central Bank. That means, with Mother to run the baby in the happy, cold-and-not-so-cold-running-water bungalow, our plans for the merrie new year are set."

No one understood what Father said then in words. They were like so many dates stuck together in their box. But you knew without words. And you knew that Frank and Fleta knew, and strangely enough, so did Stella.

"Well, Father Regan, if you feel that way about it we're sorry. Mighty sorry. But there's nothing much to do about it. We'd like for our youngster to come in for education and travel and the privileges that money can buy. It takes a stronger-minded mother than I to say that he will be better off without the privilege of inheritance."

"Stella. . . ."

"Just let me finish, Frank, and then you have your say. If little Frankie here is going to be knocked out of his inheritance because of the sins of spring-off, meaning me, I'm prepared to take the responsibility. I'm going to gamble on the known

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quantity, Father. I think, given his chance, Frank has genius. A genius in the hand is worth two in posterity. Little Frankie may want to be a teller in a bank or a chess champion or a movie star when he grows up. I'm willing to let his future take care of itself and look to his father's present. I think some day both of them may thank me for it."

The thumping of Father's cane and the bunches of glued-up words in this strangest of family conferences. Father's eyes that seemed draining down inside of him and Stella's fierce young face leveled full at him.

"You see, Father dear, Stella only means . . ."

"No, Laura, Stella doesn't only mean! About my only justification for deserving to be the wife of a man like your son, Father Regan, is that I may help to save him from going on the rocks of family intentions. I don't intend that his fine and sensitive kind of mind shall be crammed into the biscuit-tin mold a rich father happens to have designed for him."

"Stella!"

"It's true, Frank. Since the day I clapped eyes on you, I've been one of those grand kind of people with a mission. You! The mission of you! I haven't any illusions about the fiber of me and the fiber of you. I'm as utilitarian as spinach. And I'm glad that I am for your sake. I'm not afraid of poverty. I've been on the most intimate terms with it all my life.

"There's a way around poverty, if you learn how to wrench your point of view. But what I am afraid of, is the kind of misery that eats through and through and through a man who is spending his life measuring in cubic feet of lumber, when he is pining to piddle around metrical feet of verse. There's not much to be done about that."

"Father, Stella's right."

"Of course I'm right. Take the case of Laura. You're

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letting her enter the convent, aren't you? Not because you think she is right! You're too brainy a man, Father Regan, to put blinkers on your intelligence. But you seem to realize, in the case of this other child of yours, that constitutionally, psychologically, and even pathologically, that girl of yours there is a nun. She's a congenital sister of mercy. A spiritual bride — whatever that means ——"

Stella, you kept saying to yourself and sitting tightly and silently, please — please — please — if only you won't talk about it — please — I can't bear it. Not yet. Not now. Spiritual bride! The clinkers of the dead little prayers. The masses that used to be the ruby of wine and the white flame of flesh — glory of the Eucharist — where were they now? — what had shut you out? — please — please — if only they wouldn't talk about it.

"Surely you're not consenting to Laura entering convent because you want to grant yourself the biblical indulgence of offering up a ewe lamb on some altar of your earthly transgressions? It just isn't done any more!"

"Stella — please ——"

"It's because, Father Regan, with your baby-child at least, you know the truth and the wisdom of letting this girl live out the kind of life that you have put unto her. Give Frank his same chance."

"Look here, Father, Stella's right. I'm the kind of an egg I am. Doesn't seem much to be done about it. It's hard on the youngster, your feeling the way you do about it, and God knows it's hard enough on Stella, but you see the stuff she's made of, and we'll work out of our hole somehow. Anyway, what's all this rumpus about me? Now that this is practically amounting to the horror of a family conference, let's pick on Laurie."

"Yes, yes, Father—what about Laurie—now that Mother's gone ——"

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Poor Fleta. She cried that out after Frank and her voice was like a bleat in the wilderness.

So much depended on Father! On Father's reply. If Father could not give you up? Your heart missed its beat and seemed to stand waiting. In fear? In hope? You did not know. Now that you were so befogged — you did not know. That was the terrible part — you did not know if you feared that Father could not give you up — or if you *hoped* that Father would not give you up!

"Father," cried Fleta again and again, "now that Mother's gone — you can't give up Laurie ——"

"Oh, Father Regan, you don't mean that!" cried Stella, to his buzzings, and sat looking at him, a frozen little mask.

The uncanniness of Stella. What Father had said was only a blur of noise, and with lightning-like precision she had been the first to understand his yes.

"Why, Father Regan — it's like offering her up — it's like putting the ewe lamb on the altar — of your transgressions ——"

And Stella was right. You were Father's offering. Of course the lamb part of it was silly, but it was as if — oh, it was as if — Father sitting and stroking your hands with the clump of his, as if you were expiation. His expiation.

Everybody knew it, sitting there. Stella with her close-set, her merciless, her appraising eyes. Fleta with her tears. And Frank, who began to walk up and down the room and throw about his shoulders in the old way you knew so well.

You were expiation. It was as if all the little rivers in you were starting to run again. Poor Father. Whom you had never before been able to find a way to help. And now you were his offering in expiation.

"Father — nothing is changed. I'm ready for my novitiate — it's all settled, Father ——" and then under your breath under your torment — Beloved — help me ——

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"Good God, Father, look at her. She is a frightened little ghost about something. Laurie's got cold feet! Look at her!"

"Frank!"

"God, Father, if Laura is wavering in this matter, now is the time to bring every ounce of our influence to bear against it. I agree with Stella, give the girl her head in the end, even if she wants to go wrap it in a wimple. But does she want it? Look at her? That girl is in a panic! Does she know what she's letting herself in for?"

"Does she?" cried Fleta in exactly the key of Mother's little bleatings. "Does she? Oh, Laurie ——"

"Send her to Europe for a year, Father. Let her come and vagabond it with us in Richmond Hill for a while — anything so she is sure of her own mind."

"Father, nothing is changed ——"

"Stimulate her somehow, so that she begins to cerebrate about life, instead of emote about faith. Laurie is the most precious thing to be considered in this household. She's starting life. There's not a thing the matter with her that doesn't diagnose as easily as measles and whooping cough. She has every classical symptom of having been disappointed in love."

Irrefutable absurdity of that.

"Don't make your God feel foolish, Laurie, by sending back His gifts. You're returning yourself to Him precisely as you wrapped up Dud's pearl necklace and returned it to him. God, I think you're wonderful, Laurie. You've always been a nun of goodness and sweetness and light. But you don't need to go wear a wimple about it. Anyway, not before you've tested yourself out with a rousing good love affair and then, bless you, if you can yield yourself to no one short of God, get thee to thy nunnery."

You wanted to get away. From the noises. The noises of the words — they were crashing so — like a hailstorm — you

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wanted to get away — and you rose, none too surely, because of blur —

You wanted to get away. Something like a great wave was rising and gathering to crash over you. It was you tears and more than anything you wanted to get away. From the words. From the numbness. From the pointiness of Frank's face.

"I tell you — it's all settled — now let me alone — now let me alone — you hear me — you hear me — you let me alone —"

That was the end of the family conference, you stumbling out of it, threshing off Fleta and Stella from following you with arms that just batted and waved.

Kate came upstairs the next afternoon, when you were sitting in your room in a low chair beside the window, making your hands work and your fingers bleed at sewing on Father Hearn's cassock. Making your hands work. Making your hands work.

"Mr. Ropps is downstairs," she said, her eyes seeming to flow a little together.

You leaped into the turmoil suddenly of a crowded street full of shoutings and clangings.

Tell him I'm not at home. Tell him I'm not at home, you shouted to yourself in the clamor and the fire bells and the gongs against your head. Tell him I'm not at home.

But what you were saying, actually, sitting there with your hands in the cassock and your head turning as quietly as if it were not clanging with fire bells, was:

"Very well. Tell him I will be down."

You wanted above everything to keep your hands calm at their sewing of the cassock, while Kate stood there looking at you, with her eyes seeming to flow together in their focus, and so you held them with all your strength until Kate who sloughed so on her shoes, had trailed downstairs again.

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And then, the little black cashmere dress that fitted you like a tube! Where was it? Your fingers were fumbling so. Down came a shower of things from a shelf as you burrowed, and for a moment you fought in confusion, scrambling in your haste. A shameful, horrid, clawing kind of haste. The black cashmere ——

It had been on a hook in front of you all along. There were little clasps at the wrists to be opened before your arms could slide through the sleeves and more frenzy of haste — clawing kind of haste. It slid on to you, then. Black slim little tube. There was no mirror, but you knew how white your throat was, where it poured out of the black line of the cashmere. You knew, too, the way the little sun of your head rose out and the tight sheen of hair that lay like gold leaf. You could feel it, and the old sense of contour and urn. . . .

You entered the parlor a little breathlessly. Ashfurth was standing beside the table with his soft gray felt hat still in his hand, but resting against the Pieta.

The hat half covered the Pieta. You struck out furiously against that, and went down with closed eyes to the round, the mashed, the gorgeous burn of Ashfurth's lips crushing up yours.

You were so terribly ashamed to be beating him off in that weak-wristed fashion up against his chest. It was almost a tussle, all mixed up with breathing and the rustle of clothing. So finally you let yourself be caught by the wrists and stood there with your body straining back on a hypotenuse that pulled at your arm sockets.

"Good God, Laurie. I didn't mean it. I've messed up things! How the devil could I have — I'm in trouble, Laurie. I need you. Laura, do you know what torment is? The kind of torment that puts a man on the cross? No, you don't. You're too beautiful to hold torment. It would shatter you like burn-

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ing oil would shatter a lovely phial. Laurie, look at me — as I need you, Laurie. If you want me to release you, I will — but, Laurie, do you want me to?"

"I — want — you to let me — go —"

"I've frightened you! Damn. Damn. I've frightened you. There! If you're sure that you want me to let you go."

You flew back staggering from the suddenness of his release of you. Something all along you was singing. The singing of the flesh —

"How dared you!" you cried, and snatched his hat off the Pieta — "you!" And there were your hands again, riveted. And your lips again, riveted.

"Laurie, I need you. Will you talk to me? Not here. It's a grave. Of everything. It's the most hideous house I was ever in. Laura, if you ever in your sweetness wanted to help — help me, now. Laurie, will you help me now?"

Would you help him now? The little huddle of you that crouched there in the debasement of having slid down from his arm, could have flown to his pallor and the harried tangled look in his eyes, and to his hands which were narrow and nervous and full of the flicker of some of the flame that was burning along you. Would you help him!

"Laura, for God's sake, let us get out of here and to some place where we can talk. This place — it is horrible! — how have you ever lived here? It smells like mummies and dead desires. Laurie, will you help me? Will you come?"

"Where?"

"Good God, I'm not going to abduct you. Where we can talk. Where we can breathe air that hasn't been died into by the desires. By mummies. Laurie, will you come? Help me, Laurie."

It was not your volition. It was your numbness walking you upstairs and down again and into your little black hat that fitted down over all your hair. It was your numbness.

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To be slid into your cape and buttoned up warmly about the neck by fingers that were clicks of flame — to be riding in a taxicab that shunted the city streets by in clicks of flame. And all the time the thing in you that had sprung wounded at the sight of Ashfurth's hat over the Pieta, frozen there, as if the ornamental waters of a fountain had suddenly become icicles as they curved.

You had never before seen rooms like Ashfurth's. They were three flights up, over an art shop. They were brown. The autumn brown of many books. Rows of them on open shelves that lined the room. There were wide darts of color. A Javanese scarf on the piano and a huge gold-colored bowl filled with artificially colored lotus flowers. A panel between two doors of a woman, nude, with her figure done in not more than ten swashbuckling strokes and the torso at what seemed outlandish angle to the heavy legs. An Aubrey Beardsley of a man with a face like a woman. There was a glass case of jades. Green flesh that looked as if you might poke at it and get a squirm. And a table fountain of Venetian glass that turned on, and a little spray of the faint scent that lay on Ashfurth's lips began to spout. There was another torso of a woman, about a third life-size, on a long table that backed a couch. Marble that was almost as mysterious as flesh and with the bluest veins! It had no legs. But breasts. And that flowing sinuosity toward waistline that there might be the flatulence of hips.

Everywhere you looked in Ashfurth's rooms, it shone, that torso.

And there was a fire to be set going with Florentine bellows after Ashfurth had taken off your wrap and lifted your hat and put you in a blue velvet fireside chair that had blinkers and there were brasses on low tables that caught the firelight and turned places on old mahogany that caught the firelight

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and the plate glass before prints and etchings that caught and flickered with light. And Ashfurth's spectacles that waved with it. You were in Ashfurth Ropps' rooms, in the trance of your numbness.

"Laurie, stay there that way, with your head against that old blue, and let me sit here — at the feet of your beauty, until we get ourselves all embalmed in eternity — just me sitting here at the feet of your beauty — stay that way, Laurie — don't move ——"

To be talked to in chimes! The room began to swing to them.

"Laurie ——"

"Ashfurth, what do you want? How can I help you? What do you want? I must not stay here. . . ."

"Laura, I love you! No — no — I won't frighten you. I won't touch you or you might go out like a flame if I tried too hard to press the reality of your being here. Laurie, help me, dearest. I need you."

"Ashfurth, how? Ashfurth, how?"

"I've always needed you. All these years that I've been oblivious of you. I've been needing you. Life's been that way with me. Damn! I've been an eyeless mask — all my life — until now. Nothing short of your beauty has been compelling enough to give me eyes."

Your beauty — given him eyes.

"Laurie, I need you. I've never had a life. Silly mother. I married into a family that broke my spirit from the start with the enormity of money and position. Intellectually and emotionally I've been shanghaied. I'm free now, Laurie. I'm just learning to use being free as a typhoid patient must learn to walk. That night in the park — Blessed Damozel — I was glad you ran away from me because it seemed to me that a shadow had crossed the path of my freedom. But only for a moment. I see it now, Laurie. You are part of that free-

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dom. I cannot achieve it without you. Laurie, you too, wrapped like a mummy, in a house that smells like a mummy, I want to teach you everything that I've known all my life and been denied. I want to teach you everything that you've never known and therefore have never even known you've been denied. Sleeping beauty! Laura, I love you. You're as beautiful as the sound of falling water. I hear it always — water falling — tears for the poignancy of your beauty — Laura, I love you."

You had never really been beautiful before! There had been no eyes to see it because Ashfurth's eyes had not yet been born. You had really never been beautiful before, because there had been no mad ridiculous heart like Ashfurth's to hear your loveliness in the mad ridiculous rhythm of waterfall. You had really never been beautiful before until this instant. In the firelight. To the shine of the torso with the breasts and no legs. Never. Never. And yet the miracle of your being able to muster the attitude of being casual.

"Is that why you dared to bring me here, Ashfurth — is that what you mean by helping?"

"What else could I mean? You knew that! I want you to give to my life, Laurie — your life and mine — the only meaning that life should have for anybody. Happiness. I want to unwrap you from the mummy cloths. I want to teach you some of the capacity for freedom that my five years in prison have taught me. I want to teach you some of the love of life that I learned from five years of lack of it with a woman with a soul like a taxicab meter. I want to get you drunk with the incomparable wisdom of the hedonist. Laurie, only one thing matters! Happiness. If you can't get it by giving, get it by taking. If you can't get it by hook, get it by crook. Happiness, Laurie. I want to soak you in it, you poor little mewling moron — groping around for yours in a cloister of suppressed desires. There is only one reality, Laurie. The reality of you

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and me. The reality of the biology of us. Your white flesh. My love of it."

The spinning — the spinning — was it Ashfurth's face or was it you? —

"Nothing is within our mental concepts, Laurie, except the procession of mankind from the mystery of his birth to the mystery of his death. Metaphysics is the science of escape from the interval. We don't want to escape, Laura. We want to live in the interval. Gloriously. Some day I'll teach you the wisdom of what I say. You don't understand now. Dearest. Little dearest. You're so asleep. You're so white. So snow-white. Some day I'll tell you some wonderful truths and I'll read you some wonderful books — naughty exotic, forbidden books that I keep hidden away behind a golden door. Laurie, I am reality. Feel it. Feel the reality of me — here with my head against your knee. Don't turn from me to a concept. Religion is the opiate of the unfulfilled ones. Laurie, you must take my word for it. Nothing matters but happiness. Flesh-happiness. Here in this interval between life and death there is no other reality. Laurie, I love you. Isn't that immortality enough? You are as beautiful as the hush of all the snow in the world. Isn't that immortality enough? The gorgeous immortality that exists between two sunsets. . . ."

Words. Emperor-moths of them — words — words — flying everywhere — in colors — words —

You. Laura Regan. The Bride. HIS. The spurt of blood in your throat and behind your eyes — something — everything was the color, and the taste, of blood — something precious — your hand flew up. Then down.

You had struck Ashfurth bashing across the face so that the sound of batted flesh rang out and your eyes seemed wet with the red behind them. That was the way things swam. You had struck Ashfurth and the hand with which you struck

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was the one with which he jerked you to him and his kisses against your lips spun like wheels.

"You couldn't have done that if you didn't love me enough to tear me to shreds. Do it again and again and again. There's no such thing as the cold chaste love of the spirit. There's no fire that has no heat. Love is the torch of the race, Laurie. We're torches being passed on. I am my father's torch passed on to me. I shall in turn pass on that torch . . . spiritual love, Laurie, is the love of escape from dull reality. Our reality must not be dull. We are not afraid to be happy."

"You are as horrible as a faun. Your eyes are like a faun's. Slits. I want to go."

"You love me, Laurie. I have caught you in reality. And only that matters. Our *now*. . . ."

"Let me go, I tell you — I don't know"

"You do know! Only you're all hidebound — the mummy cloths from that horrible house — I want to tear them off — Laurie — you do love me — you do ——"

"I don't know — I don't know — I don't know — I only know you're like a faun and I hate you ——"

"Don't keep saying that, Laurie. You make me believe you. I couldn't bear to believe you. My capacity for not wanting, can be as passionate as my wanting. I can suffer losing you, Laurie, easier than I can suffer not owning you, body and beauty!"

The something horrid about him. The something about him that filled you with shame. And yet the fear in you. The fear in you when Ashfurth said that. Fear of Ashfurth's capacity for not wanting you. And his lips against yours — you wanted to go — but his lips against yours. . . .

"Let me go, Ashfurth."

"And then?"

"I don't know — Ashfurth, I tell you I don't know ——"

"To-night?"

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"I don't know — only let me go now ——"

"To-night."

"I don't know, Ashfurth — I guess, Ashfurth — yes — no — let me go ——"

"I'll be waiting, Laurie — only don't keep me waiting too long — to-night ——"

"—— only let me go now ——"

The bouncing home in the cab alone, in the wrap that you had been buttoned and kissed into. So much to do. So much to do. And Ashfurth, whom you were afraid to keep waiting . . . Ashfurth, whose capacity for not wanting could be passionate too. . . .

What to do first! You tried to be meticulous in order to get quiet. It was twilight in your room. Fleta and the children must be downstairs with Father. That was good. That made it easier to get quiet. Easier to get quiet. You turned on the light and drew down the shades. How lean the room was. That helped to get you quiet. And because you wanted to dash and to tear open drawers, you forced yourself, literally, with clenching of hands, to sit down on the edge of a chair and to strip off your gloves to which clung the odor of the crystal little fountain and of Ashfurth's mustache, and to wad them into a ball and to lay off your hat and to open your collar where it had been buttoned and kissed closed.

The absurd, yet the terrible fear that you must be quick. The superb impatience of Ashfurth. *Only don't keep me waiting too long.* The impatience that was like the plunge of a wild young centaur. And the forcing yourself with that fear racing through you — the forcing yourself to sit there on the chair, wadding the gloves and unwadding them.

The Max above your head. You could see with the tail of your eye the tears of Blood. You dared not look all the way.

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Beloved — where are you? Beloved — you heard yourself shouting down under your silence, Beloved, where are you?

You — Laura Regan — the Bride — stumbling and shouting in the wilderness.

You must be quick though. So much to be done.

Beloved — up there. You went down on your knees. The Max with the tears of blood on His face. There were two pansies, out of all the wilted ones, that still had eager faces hanging over the edge of the dish. You wanted to look but your eyes would not lift above the pansies, and with what was left of the tail of your glance, there were the tears of blood. . . .

You began forcing your fingers into your palms and pressing your kness down against the hardness of the floor to try and be slow and meticulous. So much to be done — that must be done slowly.

Beloved. You. Up there. The Max. Where am I? Caught here between two sunsets. Is there only this interval to be lived and died? Tell me, Beloved, that You are beyond the sunset. Are You beyond this curtain of my flesh that stands between us? Are You, Beloved? I cannot find You. In the silence. I cannot find my prayers. You have looked down and You have seen. Is there no You beyond my flesh? Then I must go, Beloved — and I am afraid of his impatience. I cannot find You. I dare not look. If You are there beyond the sunset, speak to me, Beloved, that I may know and fear and love —

You were on your feet strained up until your toes stung ten times under you and your body was like a cross because your arms were thrown out all their span.

Beloved, where are You? — speak to me or I must go, because I am afraid of his impatience — give me strength to look at You, Beloved — because I am afraid —

Your eyes that would not lift above the pansies. Your body that was strained upward and stretched into a cross. . . .

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Beloved, I am afraid — where are you? Dare I to look or will You strike me down? — dare I to look? — Your Eyes —
You had looked!

You had looked and you had shrieked! With your heart.
With your terror.

Your Eyes are closed! Beloved, Your Eyes are closed upon me. Your lids are down. The old way. I cannot see because You cannot see. Beloved, you shrieked — open Your Eyes upon me — and hurled yourself.

And hurled yourself. And hurled yourself. Something — something of you had locked. Your knees!

Your knees that clung together in their old — their rigid vise! Tear at them with your strength — strain at them with your sweat and your strength — your knees were locked in their old, their rigid vise.

Mother — I cannot walk! The white fog of snow. Dudley was coming and how slyly it was burying you. The smell of ammonia. Dudley was angry. . . .

Your legs were roots. No wrench that would free them. The old drenching terror of not being able to walk. Those knees of yours that formed the base of the lyre of your torso; the knees that shone with the little laughter of dimples. Locked! You were wabbling. Wabbling like a toy with a cylindrical base.

You could no more have moved. The rooted cross of you straining toward the blank face of the Max. The Max with the closed Eyes. The rooted cross of you. . . .

All of your rippling contour of flesh, stagnant. Ashfurth who loved the shimmer of it. Ashfurth must never know. Ashfurth must never see. And now you must keep Ashfurth waiting, and Ashfurth would not wait. You could not move. You were locked in the flesh.

Beloved, what is it? I cannot walk. Don't let him see me

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this way. Ashfurth. He might not — don't let him know. Only You, Beloved. I cannot bear that he should see me now. Only You.

Only You!

Dearest, you cried and wobbled, then toppled over, like the urn onto its side. Dearest — I see you now. You are there behind the sunset — it was the fog — the white fog of the flesh. Just for a moment — the fog —

The smoke of the twilight, pouring.

Your Eyes are open! Mother, I can see them. He has opened HIS Eyes upon me once more. I can feel the light — around my face and on my neck — a wimple — Beloved, there is You, beyond the interval. You! Give me back my legs, Beloved, and I will walk on them to You.

The wrenching at your knees with your sinew and sweat. Your locked knees. Your paralyzed-with-fear knees. Give me back my legs that I may walk on them to You.

The wrenching with your sinew and your sweat until you could feel the walls of your torso strain in the torment.

Dearest, you cried, and hurled out again and again, give me back my legs that I may come to YOU!

Shimmer of waking flesh. Warmth of your knees unlocking of the paralysis of their fear. Ecstasy of walking on them toward HIM. . . .

A NOTE ON THE TYPE IN WHICH THIS BOOK IS SET

The type in which this book has been set (on the Monotype) is Garamond. This face is an adaptation by Frederick W. Goudy, of a type designed by Claude Garamont in the sixteenth century. A pupil of Geoffroy Tory, Garamont was the foremost type designer and letter cutter of his time (1510-1561). It is believed that he based his letters on the Venetian models although he has introduced a number of important differences, and it is to Garamont that we owe the letter which we know as Old Style. In adapting this type to modern usage Mr. Goudy has not attempted an exact duplication of any of the Garamont models, and he has combined all the characteristics of the original design with the unmistakable Goudy touch.



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